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BLACK AND BLUE;

OR,

NICK WHARTON ON THE WAR-PATH.

By HARRY ROCKWOOD.

Author of "Alleghany Abe," "Mark the Fearless," "Little Firelock," "Burk Buckley," "Prairie Phil,"
"Simple Silas," Etc., Etc., E"

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMAN.

"Now, Pizen, be stiddy, an' strong, an' sure, fur a human life depends on ye. Thar, old boy, gin it to the imp—gin it straight to his cerebro-spinal-argosic—Ge-whitaker!"

The concluding adjective was prolonged into a groan of mingled horror and dismay. Then came a loud, spiteful report, which echoed and reverberated with such startling distinctness that one would almost suppose a dozen, instead of one, rifles had been discharged.

Then came a shout of death-agony, a chorus of commingled yells and oaths, and then a confused trampling of many feet. There was also a heavy, rumbling sound, and around an abrupt turn in the rocky defile appeared a lumbering stage-coach, drawn by five horses, and containing several passengers.

No sooner had they rounded the turn than they came abruptly to a halt, while the horses pawed and sniffed the air, as though comprehending the presence of danger. Directly across their path lay a silent form—the form of a man, evidently white, but with the upper portion of his face covered by a mask. By his side was a large revolver, while his girdle bristled with weapons.

The stage driver, a short, wiry old man, with long, bushy whiskers, bent eagerly forward, and from within the stage a half-dozen white, frightened faces appeared.

"What is the trouble?" one of the passengers asked.

At the same instant four tall figures sprang forth from their concealment, and as many revolvers gleamed in the pale moonlight.

"We will trouble you for your valuables, gentlemen, but no injury shall be done you, except your driver. He must step down and out."

The speaker was a tall, well-proportioned man, clad in a suit of deep blue flannel, and his face completely hidden by a mask. And by his side stood, seemingly, his exact counterpart, save that the other was clad in black instead of blue. Each held a leveled revolver, one directed toward the driver, the other threatening the interior of the stage.

There was a hasty consultation among the passengers, and as the blue-clad road agent stepped to the door of the coach, a slender, youthful figure leaped out, and a clear, musical voice exclaimed:

"Here are our valuables sir, and may they prove a curse to you all your days! But my fellow passengers request me to beg you to spare our driver. We are particularly anxious to reach Poker City to-night!"

The outlaw received the articles mechanically, staring in amazement at the strangely fair face of the youth.

"And why are you in such haste?" he asked.

"We have various reasons, none of which can concern you. And why are you resolved to deprive us of our driver?" the youth responded, in his clear, fearless tones.

"Because we owe him no good-will. You must find your way to the city somehow without his aid, for we must leave him. He would have been a dead man this instant had not someone shot one of our men."

The outlaw glanced toward the silent form lying upon the rocks.

"Who fired the shot?" the boy asked.

"One of your driver's friends, I suppose. We shall attend to his case as soon as yours is disposed of. Have you delivered up all your money and valuables? Unless we obtain a fair haul, we shall have to search you individually. Black and Blue are fair

men, and never take undue advantage of their victims."

"You have all, at least as far as I know. We have all heard of you before, and we are in too great a hurry to palaver for the sake of keeping the money we have with us. Can we not proceed to Poker City without further molestation?"

The driver had listened to the colloquy above-given in breathless suspense, and it was evident, even in the light of the moon, that he was shaking with fear.

"No, your driver must remain with us, and the quicker he dismounts the better for you all. Black, if Zeke Sykes don't hop down from the box before you can count ten, fill his black heart with lead!"

The driver uttered a low cry of intense horror, and with trembling limbs, leaped from his seat.

The instant his feet struck the earth, a road-agent stepped to his side, presenting the shining barrel of a revolver close to his face. At the same moment the man calling himself Blue pushed the youth toward the vehicle, exclaiming in a tone of command: "Take the ribbons, and drive on, boy, and thank your stars that Black and Blue spared your life. The horses will take you right, if you let them have their way."

The youth mounted the box, seized the reins and whip, and in another moment the clumsy vehicle was once more lumbering over the hard, rocky road. The dead outlaw had been removed, and a minute later not a living object was visible in the defile.

A short period of death-like stillness ensued, broken only by the retreating clatter of the stage, and now and then the distant bark of a coyote.

Then, from behind a huge boulder a giant figure emerged, and arose slowly and noiselessly to an erect posture. In the pale moonlight his enormous proportions seemed exaggerated to nearly double their real size.

The man was clad from head to foot in a suit of buckskin, which was so patched and worn as to almost lose its original identity. At his belt was a long knife and a brace of revolvers, while in one hand he carried a long, heavy rifle.

Bending eagerly forward, he cast a swift glance up and down the defile, and then rested his chin upon the muzzle of his weapon, muttering, in a cautious undertone:

"Ther skunks hev' gone, an' so hev' thar victims, but the tangle ain't over with, not by a 'farnal sight, an' Nick Wharton has got somethin' to do, an' so has Pizen, I reckon. Poor Zeke! Pizen saved him this time, but he mayn't allus be on hand; an' as fur Black an' Blue an' tharimps, they showed the strangers more marcy than they generally do. That boy was a spicy un', an' I reckon he's no slouch, ef he air a little cuss. I'll see him in Poker City 'fore another sun-up, onless Pizen an' I ar' mistook, an' I reckon we isn't. But, fust, fur old Zeke. He air in a pesky tangle, an' thar's got to be a rumpus ef they take the gumption out'n him. Pizen'll hev' to dissect thar corpses, as the doctors say. Ya-as—dissect thar internal argosic my uncle the doctor would call it. Nick Wharton an' Doctor Wharton air some alike, arter all."

The strange man nodded his head very deliberately, as though fully convinced by his own argument. Then he suddenly straightened his tall figure and commenced walking swiftly down the defile, in the direction taken by the retreating road-agent.

For nearly a hundred yards the man kept on, and then struck off boldly into a narrow, ascending channel, along which a small stream ran musically over the rocks.

Presently he reached a point at which his further progress seemed barred by a steep, precipitous wall of rock. But he unhesitatingly began clambering

upward, and he soon found himself upon the summit of a heap of boulders, which had apparently been cast hither by the giant hand of nature.

There he paused, with a low ejaculation of amazement.

Beyond the pile of boulders was a level plateau, surrounded upon all sides by precipitous descents and yawning chasms.

In the center of the inclosure were grouped a dozen human forms, all of whom were clad in picturesque mountain costumes, while their faces were concealed by masks.

In the center of the group was the captive stage-driver, his hands securely bound behind him. As the gaze of Nick Wharton first fell upon the scene, they were in the act of leading their victim toward the brink of a deep gorge.

Close to the edge they paused, and the old scout suddenly leveled his rifle, expecting momentarily to see them hurl their captive downward into the depths.

But he hesitated with his finger upon the trigger, for it was evident by the maneuvers of the outlaws that they did not intend to put an immediate termination to the life of the stage-driver.

Nick bent eagerly forward, and watched their movements with breathless interest.

He saw them bind their victim's legs and arms securely; saw them make a strong lariat fast about his waist, and fasten the other end to a large rock near the brink of the chasm. Then they moved the rock still nearer the brink, until it could have been dislodged by the hand of a child, so nicely was it balanced.

The scout lowered his rifle with a long breath of relief, and to his ears came the voice of Blue, speaking in loud, stern accents:

"Now, Zeke Sykes, you may be sure that your race is run. If you so much as draw that rope tight, the rock will be dislodged and send you to certain destruction. Even a slight jar will be your death-warrant. Now we will leave you, and when the wolves and coyotes are quarreling around you, you may choose to disturb the balance of the boulder. Good-night to you!"

The unfortunate man made no response. He knew it was useless to plead for mercy, for they knew not the meaning of the word. And so he lay silent and motionless upon the hard earth, while his enemies left him, and made their way from the inclosure by way of a narrow, steep descent, down which they were obliged to pass in single file.

Nick Wharton watched the departure of the outlaws with a grin of satisfaction.

No sooner had they disappeared from view than he descended to the level plateau, and in another moment his knife severed the lariat which bound the old stage-driver. Then he bent over the helpless Zeke and quickly cut his bonds.

The next instant the two men were standing face to face and clasping hands.

"I'd given myself up for a gone turkey!" exclaimed Zeke, his voice shaking with joy.

"All 'cause yer didn't know as Doctor Wharton's nephew was in the diggin's. But yer see the Lord wa'n't quite ready to take yer, and so He sent me an' Pizen to take yer part. Yer'd been a dead corpse this minute ef Pizen hadn't spoke jest in time awhile ago. Pizen saved yer the first time; Nick Wharton the second; an' the Lord sent us both!" said the old scout.

"Was it you as fired and killed one of the varmints afore they stopped the stage?" Zeke asked.

"I reckon yer've solved the tangle, the fust time. That is, Pizen did it, but Nick was t'other side of Pizen. Give the or'nary polecat a sort of spasmodic contraction of the syphax, so to speak!"

The eccentric man chuckled good-humoredly.

"Ain't you a long ways from home quarters, Nick?" the other asked, as they retraced their steps toward the defile.

"Sorter of'n the ole trail, fact. But I don't happen to be lost. I knows whar the sun rises an' whar it sets, the same as I did in Nebrasky. The sun is a tolerable good landmark, an' it's 'bout as reg'lar as any of 'em. Now, tell me why them cusses are so sick agin you? I s'pect thar's been some sort of a tangle 'twixt ye."

Zeke cast a half-apprehensive glance up and down the defile, and in a low undertone answered:

"I've been carryin' heaps of treasure to an' from the mines, lately, an' awhile ago they tried to rack me and my load. I had more'n five thousand dollars' worth of nuggets and dust aboard, and they got wind of it somehow, and planned to force me to pan it all out. I s'pected what was up, and started out with two coaches, and a boy to drive t'other one. I went ahead, and had the boy stay behind at a certain pint, with the treasure in his coach. When I got along to 'bout whar I's stopped to-day, Black and Blue and their gang lit on me. Of course they didn't find nothin', and when they threatened to blow out my brains, I told 'em that I was to carry the gold the next morning. As soon as they were out of sight I drove on apiece, left my team to take care of itself, and went back to whar I left t'other stage. Of course they didn't s'pect it so soon, and so wasn't looking for it, and I got through all safe. Somehow they got wind of my trick, and they're bound to make me suffer for it."

"Twixt you an' I, Zeke," Nick returned, bending his head close to that of his companion, "Nick an' Pizen come to these diggins arter this very Black an' Blue, as they calls themselves, an' what's more, these diggins 'll git too 'tarnation hot to hold 'em in less'n two weeks! This is confantial, bear in mind. Thar'll be a pesky rumpiss in Poker City one of these fine mornin's, an—hist! Dodge into the shadows, Zeke—quick!"

Both men sprang behind boulders. As they did so there was the clatter of an approaching horseman, and the next moment a wild, strange-looking being dashed into view. The face of Zeke Sykes turned ashy pale, and he explained in a terrified whisper:

"It are the ghost of Pale Jack, as was murdered hyarabouts, more'n a year ago!"

Nick made no response, but as the singular being drew near he raised his long rifle and took deliberate aim at the galloping horse.

CHAPTER II.

NED CLYDE'S RESISTANCE.

POKER CITY, Colorado, was one of those mushroom mining towns which spring up in a veritable wilderness in a few months, and sink into insignificance again with even greater rapidity.

Near the western extremity of the single street which divided the town in twain was a long, low building, which bore a sign-board of the rudest description, while the lettering was remarkable for its irregularity. A certain degree of sign-reading adeptness, however, would have enabled the stranger to make out the following legend:

"BLUE LIGHTNING BUSTER."

As this title will leave the reader as deeply in the dark as ever, we will simplify it by calling the place by its proper name—a grog-shop and monte-bank. At least it had once been established for monte-playing, but the bank had recently been "busted," in border parlance, and was now used for general gambling purposes, poker being the most popular game among its frequenters.

To the Blue Lightning, as it was most commonly called, we will next call the reader.

It was early evening, but the small bar-room was already well-filled with miners, Mexicans and half-breeds. Behind the short, high bar was a thick-set, low-browed individual, who was busy supplying the demands of his customers, for his nefarious trade was always lively from the hour that the miners ended their day's toil until late into the night.

While every inmate of the apartment was engaged in conversation, or drinking the vile decoction which was sold for whiskey, a slight, boyish figure appeared upon the threshold, and paused, as though doubtful whether to enter or not.

The youth was slender, lithe and willowy in his motions, and possessed a singularly fair and delicately chiseled face. His age could not have exceeded sixteen years, and he was remarkably small even for that age.

It is hardly necessary to explain that he is the same youth whom we saw aboard the stage-coach the night previous, and who so boldly met the demands of the road-agents.

He hesitated only a moment upon the threshold, but entered quietly, and retreated to a distant corner of the room, where he remained for some time unnoticed. His small, keen eyes watched the faces of the other inmates, while an expression of unconcealed disgust settled upon his countenance as he listened to their ribald jests and coarse laughter. It was evident that the associations were intensely repugnant to his nature; yet he persistently kept his post, his gaze fixed upon the door with strange eagerness.

For some time nobody seemed to be aware of his presence. But at last he was suddenly aroused from his reflections by a tall figure striding toward him, and a heavy hand falling upon his shoulder.

"Yunker, what'll yer take?" exclaimed a gruff voice close to his ear.

He glanced up into the coarse, brutal countenance, and something like a shudder swept over his slender form. But there was no trace of fear in his clear tones as he replied:

"I do not wish for anything, unless it be a glass of cold water."

The brawny hand was lifted from his shoulder, and the stranger stepped backward with an oath. Turning to his companions, whose attention was now called to the fair-faced youth, he said:

"Hear what the younker says, pards? Thinks he'll drink a glass of water, at the expense of Bill Hyde, I s'pose! I reckon he's outer his el'ment, slightly. I reckon Black Bill don't pay fur no water fur anybody to drink, not while anythin' better is kept in this shebang. Water! haw—haw!"

The dark-faced giant brought his huge hands together with a sound like the report of a pistol, and gave way to a prolonged howl of derision.

Several of the bystanders joined in the laugh, and it was evident that the situation of the youth was by no means an enviable one. His fair cheeks turned a shade paler, and he glanced toward the door, as though meditating flight.

Once more Black Bill faced the youth, and in a low, significant tone, asked:

"What mought be the name of this cold-water lad?"

"You may call me Ned Clyde," the youth answered, quietly.

"Jed, fill a tumbler half full of red-eye for the bantam as calls himself Ned Clyde!" ordered Bill.

The bar-tender obeyed, and the ruffian added, with a savage oath:

"Now, bantam, step up and pour that pizen inter yer, an' no squakin' 'bout it, nither!"

The youth drew his slender figure very erect, and a gleam of resolution flashed from his small blue eyes.

"I never tasted a drop of the vile stuff in my life, and I shall not begin now," he uttered, firmly.

Every member of the group stared at the speaker as though thunderstruck at his unhesitating response.

Black Bill gave utterance to a flood of profanity which might well have terrified the fiends of Hades, could they have heard them.

For a moment he glared upon the slender youth who had so openly defied him, and then strode to the bar, seized the glass of liquor, and started swiftly toward Ned Clyde.

But before he had taken three paces toward the youth he found himself staring into the barrel of a small silver-mounted revolver.

A shout of mingled admiration and intense amazement went up from the throats of the assembled miners, and then the clear tones of Ned Clyde rent the air:

"Another step nearer and your life will not be worth the glass of liquor you hold in your hand!" he cried.

A minute of intense silence ensued. Then the gruff voice of Black Bill sounded again.

"D'ye know what yer ar' doin', younker?" he uttered, holding the glass of liquor aloft in one hand, while the other dropped to his girdle and rested on the haft of his knife.

"I think I understand my own intentions!" was the cool rejoinder.

"Yer mean to say that Black Bill ar' 'feared o' that pop-gun?"

"I haven't said anything about your fears. You can risk my marksmanship if you choose!"

"And yer'd fire at me, would yer?"

"If you have any doubts in the premises, you can come a pace nearer and I will settle them for you."

The ruffian's dark countenance grew livid with pent-up anger, and his long, shining knife flashed in his hand.

"Feared of the bantam, air ye?" exclaimed one of the bystanders, as Bill hesitated.

The taunt was sufficient to make the man reckless. He took a quick stride toward the youth; there was a flash, a sharp report, and the upraised hand of Black Bill dropped nervelessly by his side, while the glass fell to the floor and was shattered to atoms.

There was a wild, savage yell from a dozen throats, and a half-dozen miners sprang toward the youth, weapons in their hands.

"Down with the bantam! Gin' him the lesson he needs! Pinfeather the bird!" were the cries that filled the air.

And Ned Clyde, with his fair cheeks deathly white, stood motionless as a statue, with cocked revolver, and his back braced firmly against the wall of the apartment.

Only for an instant did Black Bill hesitate now. The unyielding defiance of his youthful adversary, together with the twinge of excruciating pain in his wounded arm almost maddened him.

With a cry that sounded more like the howl of a wild beast than of a human being, the ruffian's tall figure shot into the air, and the next instant the weapon of our young hero was sent spinning across the room, while the uninjured hand of the man clutched his slender throat.

Ned Clyde now found himself as helpless and feeble as an infant, for the single brawny arm of his foe held him against the wall with resistless force.

His brain whirled dizzily; his eyes seemed starting from their sockets; his cheeks grew purple; consciousness, and the power to move, was leaving him; he uttered a low, gurgling cry.

At this critical junction Black Bill suddenly let go his hold, and the next instant he was sent in a quivering heap the upon the floor, and a stentorian voice exclaimed:

"What do these hyar doin's mean? Is this the sort o' men yer have in Poker City? Gewhitaker, boyees! this 'ere's the pizenest tangle Nick Wharton ever lit on, it are, by a tarnal sight."

The senses of Ned Clyde quickly returned to him, and he beheld a gigantic figure standing between him and his persecutors.

For a moment nobody spoke. Black Bill lay motionless where the sudden blow of the old borderman had sent him, while his backers slunk back, for an instant cowed by the Titan proportions and aggressive attitude of the new-comer.

But the lull lasted only for a moment. The low-browed proprietor of the place was the first to break the silence.

"Who are you as comes in here s'pecting to run my shebang?" he exclaimed, with a show of bluster.

The small grey eyes of the giant scout were turned upon the speaker, and an expression of contempt curled his bearded lips.

"I kin tell ye who I are, and that pesky sudden. I reckon, by yer build, that yer never seed Nebrasky sile, or the yaller water of the North Platte, or even a full-blooded Injun. You never reached yer growth, yer didn't. They nussed ye on rum instead of milk, I allow, and when ye come to grow, ye growed sideways instid of up'ards; an' what's more, yer've got yer head full of rum this blessed minute instid of brains, an' rum raises a mess of tarnal tangles sometimes."

While his benefactor was speaking, Ned Clyde advanced to his side, and placed one slender hand upon his arm.

"You have saved my life, but I cannot expect you to risk your own by remaining here longer. We had both better make our escape while we can do so, for the odds are against us," the youth said, in a low tone.

Nick Wharton looked down into the upturned face with a solicitous expression.

"Are yer much hurt, little feller?" he asked, in his tenderest tone.

"No—no! But in another minute I fear I should have been. We are strangers to each others, but I know you are different from the others whom I have met here. As a friend, I ask you to escape with me, ere it is too late," said the boy, earnestly.

"Yer air right, boy, an' I'll take your advice, for your sake. I ain't afear'd of nuthin' for myself, but I couldn't bear to see 'em tech you. Jest skin outer the door lively as you kin, an' I'll foller, an' see that none of yer enemies lay a hand on yer!"

Ned bowed, and with graceful agility bounded toward the door. A hoarse shout went up from the throats of the ruffians, and a number started to intercept the fleeing figure. But they found their way blocked by the giant form of Nick Wharton.

"No yer don't, not if Pizen an' I knows ourselves, an' I reckon they does!" uttered Nick, his long rifle leveled at the head of the foremost.

The ruffians recoiled with muttered imprecations and cries of chagrin. At that instant the motionless form of Black Bill suddenly stirred, and he sat erect, gasping for breath.

The scout comprehended that the time had arrived for him to make certain of escape. And with his weapon still leveled, he retreated backward toward the door.

As he reached the threshold, the report of a revolver rang on the air, and he felt a slight, burning sensation upon his hand. But he did not pause to see who fired the shot. He bounded out into the gloom, and in another moment felt the hand of Ned Clyde clutching his.

"Come, let us run for it, for they may take a notion to give us chase. I would not have you imperil your life for mine!" exclaimed the musical tones of the youth.

The scout made no response, but obeyed the command of his companion, and they soon reached the outskirts of the town.

The night was dark, for the moon had not yet risen, and the sky was obscured by clouds. Nick came abruptly to a halt, still holding the soft hand of the strange, fearless boy in his.

Ned was panting with the violence of his exertions, but the powerful borderman breathed scarcely quicker than usual.

"Ye air sorter tuckered, I reckon," said the scout, looking down into the pale face of his companion.

"Yes; I'm not very strong. I fear you think I am rather frail and babyish for a boy," the other replied.

"Nothin' of the sort, my lad. Ye air grit to the back-bone, on'y you haven't the muscle to back it up. What air yer name?"

"Call me Ned Clyde."

"I reckon ye air a stranger in these parts. You looked like an angel sandwiched in 'twixt a pack of ornary polecats, so to speak, when I lit into the tangle. What raised the rumpus, anyhow?"

"Black Bill undertook to force me to drink some whiskey!"

"An' yer refused, eh?"

"Yes; I would have died rather than yield!"

"I reckon you would, boy. Didn't I say you was grit clean through, an' the hull length of ye in the bargain? Hist! I reckon we ain't clear of the tangle yet!"

They were standing near a rude miner's hut, and as the old borderman uttered the concluding warn-

ing, a tall figure emerged from beyond, and halted within a dozen paces of our friends.

CHAPTER III.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

At the close of the first chapter we left Zeke Sykes and Nick Wharton crouching within the shadow of two boulders, while a horse with a singular rider was coming swiftly down the defile. The scout held his rifle ready to fire, but as the strange being came within plain view, he lowered it with a perceptible shudder.

The horse was large and clean-limbed, and enveloped from head to tail in a sort of close-fitting blanket, which looked fiery red in the pale moonlight. But the appearance of the rider was yet more strange and terrible.

It was a tall, white figure, with large, bony hands holding the bridle, and a long, flowing robe of white reaching to the stirrups. And to add to the horrible and mysterious aspect of the strange being, it was *without a head!* The shoulders, body and limbs were perfect, to all appearance, but the long, white robe came up close to what appeared to be the throat, and there it was dyed with blood, as though the head had been recently severed from the body.

It was no wonder that the withered cheeks of Zeke Sykes turned ashy in hue as the strange horseman drew near. And Nick Wharton, whose nerves never quivered when surrounded by savage foes, now found himself incapable of leveling his trusty rifle. Why is it that the most courageous man or woman will sometimes become weak and fearful in the presence of a mystery, when they would not quail before a legion of visible human foes?

The two men gazed upon the strange object as it passed, the white radiance of the moon adding to the weirdness of its aspect. The iron shod feet of the horse clicked sharply upon the rocks; they could hear the labored breathing of the animal with perfect distinctness; but from the phantom rider came no audible sound, nor even any sign of life. As it reached a point a short distance below the concealment of the two men, Nick Wharton suddenly raised his weapon to his shoulder again, and its loud report rang sharply on the air. But the phantom horseman galloped steadily onward, apparently untouched by the shot.

In another moment it disappeared from view around an abrupt turn in the defile.

Nick Wharton sprang suddenly to his feet, drawing a long breath of relief.

"That air beats anythin' ole Pizen ever hove lead at, an' no mistake!" exclaimed Nick, as he proceeded to reload his rifle in his quick, deft fashion.

"It's a ghost, Nick--the ghost of Pale Jack!" returned Zeke, in an awed tone.

"An' who's Pale Jack?" the giant asked.

"A miner as was murdered sort of mysterious 'bout a year ago. They say he'd got a big lot of gold concealed on his person, and had started for Denver, and was going from there to his home at the East. He started down this defile lossback, but he never reached Denver, and a few days arter a miner found the body of a white man with his head cut clean off, lying somewhere nigh this very pint. The head couldn't be found, but the body was identified as Pale Jack's. And since that time it's nothin' uncommon to see his ghost ridin' up and down the defile, jest as you and I jest seed it!"

By this time Nick had finished reloading his rifle, and as his companion ceased speaking, he brought the stock of the weapon to the ground with sudden vehemence.

"I'll tell yer, Zeke, I doesn't put much stock in this ghost business. I reckon it air all a 'tarnal humbug. That air critter is either a livin' man an' hoss, or else you an' I air sufferin' from mental cobberation, so to speak. I had a cousin as died of that air complaint. He used to see angels an' spirits an' jell-winkers, an' all such by moonlight. The visions used to make him 'tarnally disturbed, sometimes, an' he got so he couldn't eat nor drink nuthin'; pined away at last, till thar wa'n't nuthin' left on him, 'ceptin' his suspender buckles. Doctor Wharton said his congooviste didacks sort of spooligated, so to speak. Them Latin complaints air awful."

The eccentric man drew a long breath of relief as he ceased speaking, his quaint countenance wearing a half-humorous expression. Sykes glanced at him quickly, as though at a loss whether to think his remarks were serious or otherwise.

"What makes you tell such yarns, Nick?" he asked, as they resumed their course up the defile.

"I kain't count for it myself. Reckon it air a pizen peccoliarly of my disposition. The Wharton family were all peccoliar, in one way an' 'nother. My gran'ther used terbacker till the doctors said he'd die ef he didn't stop. So he went to chewin' slippery-elum, an' his body got so cussed slippery that he wouldn't stay put anywhar. Then he sot about chewin' tar. That worked curi's, too. His clothes all stuck fast to his hide, an' they had to soak him in lubricatin' ile for three mortal weeks afore they could get 'em off. Arter that--but hyar's 'nuther tangle! Make yerself skeerce, Zeke, fur yer haven't any weapons. I'm ekal to this sort of scrimmage lone."

This last remark was elicited by the sudden appearance of several dusky figures at a considerable distance up the defile. The light of the moon fell fully upon them, showing them to be Indians.

Our friends were standing within the shadow of a huge boulder, and, therefore, were not visible to their enemies.

"I wonder what them Injuns are doing about here?"

I didn't know as they had been up to mischief lately!" exclaimed Zeke, in a whisper.

"I reckon they isn't all Injuns in that pack. Thar's more'n one kind of tarnal tangle afoot in these regions, and I'm determined to untangle 'em. Jest you keep out o' sight, Zeke, an' I'll gin 'em a lesson."

The old stage-driver looked hastily about him for a place of concealment. He spied a narrow opening in the perpendicular wall of the defile, and unhesitatingly ensconced himself therein.

The scout watched him until he was assured of his safe concealment, and then moved with rapid, silent strides down the defile, taking care to keep his form within the shadows.

Presently he found what he sought, a point whence he could reach the summit of the wall of rocks. Up the steep ascent he made his way, and he soon found himself upon a kind of rocky shelf, fully fifty feet above the bed of the canyon. He could plainly see the dusky forms of the Indians as they moved slowly down the gorge, their plumes waving in the soft breeze, and their dark faces, hideous with war-paint, seeming as distinct in the pale moonlight as though it were broad day.

"They are up to some sort of pizen mischief, but the diffikilty is to know what it air. I reckon I kin give 'em somethin' to take up their minds, for a few minutes, anyhow. Sort o' put 'em in a trance, so to speak."

As he spoke, Nick Wharton glanced hastily about him for the means to accomplish his designs. He espied a large, moveable rock lying near the brink, and without a moment's hesitation, began moving it yet nearer. At last he paused in his effort, with the rock poised on the extreme edge of the shelf. Nearer came the slowly-moving foes; they soon reached a point directly beneath their enemy. Then the latter pushed the huge rock over the brink.

There was a brief instant of breathless silence; then a thunderous crash, and then a wild, blood-curdling yell that lingered on the night air in quavering echoes.

Cautiously the old scout peered over the brink, and beheld the scene far below.

The savages had scattered in all directions, and were staring, horror-struck, at the mass of broken rock and quivering human flesh in the centre of the defile.

Two of their number had been crushed out of all semblance to humanity by the missile.

Only for an instant did our hero expose himself. He drew back and crouched, silent and motionless, for several minutes, waiting for some demonstration on the part of his enemies. He knew that they were looking upward for the cause of this catastrophe, and it was likely they would attribute it to the accidental dislodgement of the boulder by some animal.

Suddenly the sharp report of a rifle rang on the air, and a bullet flattened with a dull click upon the wall above the scout. Still he did not stir from his position, and another interval of death-like silence ensued.

Then a new sound came to his ears--the clatter of a galloping horse, coming momentarily nearer. He could hear a hasty, guttural consultation on the part of the Indians, and, unable to restrain his curiosity, Nick once more peered over the brink. He scarce repressed an exclamation of intense amazement. Coming up the defile at a measured, regular gallop, was the singular headless being which had so startled Zeke Sykes and the giant a half hour earlier. The Indians had all drawn within the shadows, and he could dimly discern their dark forms huddled closely together, while they stared in awed silence at the approaching horseman.

On--on it came, swerving neither to the right nor left, the fiery red robe of the horse, and white, blood-smeared drapery of the headless rider looking weird and indescribably horrible in the pale moonlight.

Nick Wharton, unlike most men of his class, had not one grain of superstition in his whole being. To him every visible object had a substantial, material origin. More than once during his long, adventurous career had he encountered circumstances of a mysterious nature. He had roamed alone at night along trails said to be haunted; he had faced ghosts and goblins among mountain wildernesses, and upon silent-flowing streams; but he had ever found them to be very human indeed, under his practical tests. More than once had he captured a noted robber or outlaw in some ghostly guise, which had terrified and baffled the investigations of others.

But in all his life he had never found himself so perplexed and mystified as in the present case. He could see the savages drawn more closely together as the phantom horseman approached. And to his amazement he beheld two of them suddenly raise their rifles, and the two reports rang simultaneously on the air. The mysterious being was not more than a dozen yards distant from the marksmen at the instant they fired, and it seemed hardly possible that they could have missed their aim. Yet neither horse nor rider gave any sign to indicate that they had been struck.

On they came--and in another moment they had passed the terrified Indians, and disappeared around a turn in the defile.

The savages remained motionless for a minute or two after the Phantom Horseman had gone from view. Then they emerged from the shadows and commenced removing the fragments of rock from the crushed bodies of their unfortunate comrades.

Again the old scout glanced about for a missile to hurl upon them, but there was none within reach. There were only five of his enemies remaining, and he was loathe to allow them to escape when they seemed so completely at his mercy. Cautiously cocking his rifle, he bent forward and took quick aim at the nearest of his foes.

The heavy report shook the air, and there was a wild death-wail, which awoke mournful, lingering echoes.

The stricken savage sank down at the feet of his comrades, who uttered cries of dismay. They glanced quickly upward, but they could see nothing to indicate the hiding-place of their enemy save a white wreath of smoke.

In an instant the remaining four sought shelter behind adjacent boulders, and all became deathly silent once more.

The giant scout quietly reloaded his rifle and then crouched close to the rocky wall.

For a long time he remained patiently waiting for some sound to indicate the departure of his enemies. But no sound came to his ears, and it was evident that the Indians had either departed silently, else they were watching patiently for him to expose himself.

At last he arose to his feet and went as close as he dared to the brink. Bending cautiously forward, he peered down into the defile.

Not a living object was in view. The mangled remains of the slain still lay in plain view. And in the distance he could hear the signaling howl of a wolf that had scented the feast from afar.

"I reckon the varmints air too skeery to hang 'round hyar a gre't while. It air a unhealthy locality to 'em; makes 'em tarnal sick, so to speak!" mused the whimsical ranger, drawing back from the brink.

At that moment a slight sound in his rear caused him to turn quickly, tightly clutching his rifle.

He found himself face to face with two tall, half-naked Indian warriors. He was standing within a yard of that terrible brink; two paces backward would send him into the depths of the canyon, and before he could level his rifle, or even spring to one side to avoid the onslaught, both his foes sprang toward him with savage yells of triumph.

CHAPTER IV.

A TERRIBLE COMBAT.

Quick as thought the giant scout dropped his rifle and grasped the hilt of his long hunting-knife, at the same instant giving utterance to a thunderous shout that awoke the distant echoes.

There was a mighty sweep of his long arm, and one of his foes sank at his feet, his dusky face split in twain, his powerful form quivering in the throes of death. Before he could strike a second blow, however, he found himself clasped in the iron embrace of his remaining enemy, who was the larger and most powerful of the two.

For an instant the twain stood almost motionless, locked in each other's embrace. Then they swayed to and fro, each straining every nerve to overcome the other.

Nick Wharton found, for the first time in his life, an antagonist whose muscular power nearly equaled his own. The savage was much shorter than himself, but in breadth of shoulders and bulk of body he was more than matched. Therefore, as neither of the combatants possessed the slightest point of advantage, it promised to become a contest which must decide the question of life and death to our hero.

The savage strove with all his energies to force his antagonist backward toward the brink of the chasm. But the scout comprehended his purpose, and thwarted it by springing sideways, and the next moment the Indian was in the same dangerous position from which the other had escaped.

Then the combatants repeatedly exchanged positions, performing rapid evolutions in dangerous proximity to the threatening brink.

At last both ceased their efforts, as though by mutual consent, to regain their breath and gather energies for new tactics.

For a minute or two the twain stood motionless as statues, though still tightly locked in each other's embrace. Then each made a sudden, powerful effort to hurl the other nearer the edge of the rocky platform. But each was equally ready to resist the attempt, and it only resulted in both being thrown prostrate by the violence of his own and his adversary's exertion.

The scout still clung to his knife, but as yet he had all he could do to keep himself from being thrown from the shelf, and could consequently make no use of it. But now he strove to free his arm from beneath his foe, whose ponderous weight rested partially upon it.

After several attempts he succeeded, but before he could strike a single blow, his adversary had seized his wrist, and held back his arm with resistless power. The Indian had not withdrawn his own knife from its sheath, and the scout kept his energies so constantly engaged that he could not do so. Thus the twain struggled, throwing all their reserve of strength into the conflict.

The cords stood out upon the huge, dusky arms of the redskin like knots of iron, while his breath came gaspingly. Nick Wharton, though comparatively an old man, showed by his unwavering strength that in that particular, at least, he was in the prime of life. Nor was he less agile or willowy than his red foe.

Still they fought, at one moment the savage seeming to hold the advantage, but at the next the scout would seem the most likely to succeed.

But it could not continue with unabated ferocity forever. It was a mere question of physical endurance from the first. And in this, despite his advanced years, Nick Wharton proved himself the superior.

The redskin breathed more and more laboriously,

and he seemed straining every nerve in a last desperate effort to force his adversary to the edge of the shelf; and to the horror of our hero, he found himself suddenly pushed backward, until it seemed as though he were poised upon the very brink.

Nerved by desperation he tore his hand free from the grasp of his enemy, and before the latter could thwart the attempt, the knife of the scout was plunged with terrific force into his naked shoulder.

The savage uttered a low, gasping cry and made one last desperate attempt to hurl his foe into the depths of the canyon. At the same instant Nick struck a second fierce blow with his knife, this time at the throat of the savage.

Their action had been simultaneous; therefore, while the Indian released his hold in the throes of death, our hero found himself going swiftly, surely, over that terrible brink.

The scout clutched desperately at the form of his dying adversary; but he found that he was only drawing him downward also, making his own destruction all the more certain. But with sure death staring one in the face, almost miraculous deeds may be accomplished.

The fingers of the scout caught in a narrow crevice in the massive rock, and the next instant, by the use of his monstrous strength, he drew himself once more upon the level surface.

For several minutes Nick Wharton lay silent and motionless beside his slain enemy, the only vigor of life about him being his loud, rapid breathing. But he soon recovered sufficiently to sit erect, and glance about him. He feared momentarily the coming of the two surviving redskins. As soon as he could do so, he seized his knife, coolly wiped the blood upon his trousers, and thrust it into its sheath.

Then he picked up his rifle, which he had dropped at the beginning of the contest, and commenced cautiously to descend into the ravine. He kept a sharp lookout for his surviving foes, but reached the bed of the canyon in safety. During all this time he had heard nothing from Zeke, and now he approached his hiding-place, calling his name in a low, cautious tone.

There was no response.

Had the Indians discovered him, and terminated his life in his helplessness? The scout regretted deserting him, for even with weapons, the old stage-driver could have made a poor show of resistance with his small, withered frame.

Nick bent and peered into the small cavern in which Zeke had sought safety. All was dark and deathly silent. Again he called his name, but no response nor sound of any sort rewarded him. With an indefinable sense of dread, Nick crawled into the little cavern. To his amazement, it was empty—Zeke Sykes was gone.

The old ranger felt a sense of relief, for now there was hope at least that the stage-driver was living. In years past these two had been inseparable friends, though so unlike each other in their ways, and with Nick Wharton even a youthful friendship was not easily forgotten.

It had been several years since the two had met until to-night, and Nick's first act had been to save his friend's life, at the risk of bringing summary vengeance upon himself. Hence his intense anxiety for the present safety of the stage-driver, and his former solicitude.

Assured that Sykes was concealed nowhere in the vicinity, the ranger resumed his course up the defile, reaching Poker City before sunrise. He made his way directly to the large, one-story building which called itself a "hotel," and was soon sleeping soundly and recuperating from his recent severe contest.

We will now return to the point at which chapter second of our story terminated.

As the tall figure approached our friends, they saw to their intense amazement that it belonged to an Indian, clad in a half-savage and half-civilized costume.

He advanced boldly until Nick Wharton suddenly leveled his long rifle, exclaiming, in his deep, thunderous tones:

"Who air you, and what d'ye want?"

The Indian halted abruptly, with a grunt of surprise.

"Don't shoot—me all good!" he exclaimed, standing motionless as a statue.

"What're ye arter, then?" pursued Nick, without lowering his weapon.

"Me got something to say to him!" making an emphatic gesture toward Ned Clyde.

"It is the same fellow whom I saw last night at the hotel, playing poker with a Mexican. Let's see what he has to say," interposed the youth.

Nick grounded his weapon, and the redskin drew nearer, a cunning light shining in his dark orbs, which were visible, even in the gloom.

"You both jess come here, you heap don't know, too!" the savage exclaimed, tapping his forehead significantly.

"What do you mean by that 'tarnal gibberish?'" Nick asked, impatiently.

"You no un'stan'—ugh! Me heard 'em talkin' 'bout you—they say they git much straight flush on you. You got no aces, and you get beat, heap bad."

He spoke rapidly, gesticulating energetically.

"He air drunk, I reckon," whispered Nick, puzzled by the singular manner and speech of the Indian.

"Me not drunk, an' me no fool neither. It jess as I say—they get flush on little pale brave. He no got any frien's, but he got money. They 'ink he heap rich. Me 'ink he heap fool if he stay at hotel. They get flush on him!"

"Can't yer talk anythin' only poker, Injun? Tell us what ye mean, an' that 'tarnal quick, or I'll let Pizen have his way. He'd let a streak of darkness

straight through your polypus system, so to speak, an' you wouldn't be of any 'count as a live Injun ag'in, you wouldn't, by hokey!"

Nick spoke threateningly, but the savage only watched him furtively with his restless, cunning eyes, without stirring from his tracks.

"Do you mean to say that I have enemies who would rob me?" the youth asked.

"Ugh! that's it. They dunno what you're for. They get heap big flush on you, you no look out. Injun Jim heard them when they thought him soun' 'sleep—he no sleep soun', allus keep one eye peeled."

"What is your object in telling me this? I never befriended you nor saw you till last night," said the boy, curiously.

The cunning expression in the eyes of the savage became more marked.

"Me no fool—me no drunk this time. Me drunk oder night, and they got two, t'ree flush on me. Me busted; slep' all night fore me knowed it. Dust all gone, firewater dranked up, knife gone, pistol nowhere. Me call that straight flush, ugh!"

Injun Jim, as the savage called himself, struck his brawny breast fiercely with his clenched fist as he spoke, and there was a wicked gleam in his snaky eyes.

"I see through the tangle now, Injun," said Nick. "You played poker with the varmints till they got you drunk, an' then they went through ye an' left ye spoiled, so to speak. It ought to larn ye not to drink firewater, but I suppose it won't, no more than it does white men. S'perience don't 'mount to a 'tarnal bit in some cases. My gran'ther made that remark when he used to crack his head ag'in' the top of the door casin' every time he went out or come in. He was a small man like myself. That are door casin' wore him down, though. It scraped three inches off'n his cranium, which gin it a pecooliar shape. Smallness and veracity are hereditum in the Wharton fambly—oh, in course they are."

Nick Wharton drew a long breath as he ceased speaking, and then suddenly bent forward, bringing his face close to that of the savage.

"Injun, ye air nobody's fool, an' what ye jess told us we air grateful for, an' ye sha'n't lose nuthin'. But we're in a pizen tangle, an' unless we go back to the hotel we've got to stay outer doors all night. That air nuthin' for me. But this lad air delikit, an' I reckon the Lord sent me to look arter him. I'm goin' ter do it, anyhow. We don't know the lay of the land hyarabouts, an' ye kin do us 'nuther sarvice by findin' us safe quarters."

The savage glanced furtively about him in his sly, cunning way before he responded.

Then he said:

"Me got shebang close by. Jess keep still, and no show cards, and we flax 'em all—git straight flush. Come."

The savage turned abruptly and led the way across a level space, presently halting before a small, rude building. Nick and the youth followed close at his heels. He flung open the door and entered, but his companions paused upon the threshold, until he had lighted a small oil lamp. Then they went in, also, closing the door after them.

They found themselves in a small, square apartment, almost totally destitute of furniture. They had not more than fairly got within when the sounds of rapid, heavy footsteps outside came to their ears. Quick as thought the savage extinguished the light and sprang to the door. In a moment he had made it secure, and stood back a pace distant.

A moment later some one tried to open the door. Then there was a moment of breathless silence; then a loud, gruff voice exclaimed:

"Open the door, Jim, or we'll tear yer shanty down over yer head!"

Ned Clyde drew back, his cheeks turning pale with sudden fear. Nick Wharton quickly cocked his rifle and stepped to the side of Indian Jim.

CHAPTER V.

NICK UNRAVELS A "TANGLE."

"Don't yer back down, Injun, for I'll stick by ye through the tangle, as long as Pizen an' I can handle each other!" whispered the giant, in the ear of his dusky companion.

The savage made no response, and a moment later the gruff voice outside again spoke:

"Open, I say, unless yer wants to be peeled alive!"

Injun Jim uttered a grunt as though suddenly aroused from slumber, but made no other response.

Then came a series of tremendous blows upon the door, which caused the building to shake. The savage sprang forward and exclaimed in his deep, guttural tones:

"You stop bangin'—me shoot! What you want?"

"We want you to open the door. There's no use in you tryin' to play no game on us. There's somebody inside of yer shanty as we wants to git our han's on, an' you can't keep 'em shady ef yer sets out to!" came back from the ruffian spokesman.

"Me no open door—me shoot, you no go 'way!" returned Injun Jim, doggedly.

The clamoring blows upon the door were repeated, and a chorus of loud shouts, oaths and threats filled the air.

Nick Wharton quickly placed the muzzle of his weapon at a crevice near the door, and a thunderous report followed. There was a loud yell of pain, and the sound of rapidly retreating footsteps. Then a brief period of death-like silence ensued.

"We no safe here—mus' run funder. They have straight flush we stay here till they come back!" Injun Jim uttered, rapidly opening the door as he spoke.

"Whither shall we flee?" Ned Clyde asked, his clear tones shaking with fear despite his attempt to conceal the emotion.

"Follow me, and run fas'. Fetch 'em up all right, they no see us. They drunk, and don't know what they 'bout!" returned Jim.

Out into the open air the two darted, the savage leading the way, and the next moment they were flying across the open space to the rear of the dwelling. They were upon the outskirts of the settlement, and soon found themselves at the entrance of a narrow, deep defile which extended up into the mountains.

Injun Jim came suddenly to a halt, and his companions followed his example. Nick proceeded to reload his rifle, while the youth sank down upon the hard earth, panting from his exertions.

"They no chase us so far as this. They sober by-and-by. Then we be all right to go back," the Indian said, quietly.

Nick Wharton bent over the half-reclining form of his protegee and peered searchingly into his pallid countenance.

"You air 'tarnal delikit, youngster!" he exclaimed, in his kindest tones.

"Yes, I am not very strong," the other returned.

"See hyar, boy, I like ye! Nick Wharton don't admire delikit boyees very much, as a ginerel thing. He's too 'tarnal delikit himself. But he do sorter shine to you, and he's sot on taking keer of ye. But he air a good 'eal puzzled to know why yer parients ever let sich a tender, han'some little feller as you air come to sich a cursed region as this 'ere. It air a stump to Nick Wharton's comprehension—it is, by hokey!"

The giant spoke in a low tone, and gazed steadfastly into the fair face of the boy all the while. Ned sat erect, and drew a long, quivering sigh.

"I do not know as I have a parent living in the world. My mother died one year ago, and my father—but that is the mission which brought me to this wild, dangerous locality," he exclaimed, a ring of bitterness in his tone.

"What about your father, boy?" asked the old ranger, with sudden interest.

The youth hesitated, and then exclaimed:

"I believe you are a true and trustworthy man, and I will tell you. Perhaps you will be willing to assist me."

"Anythin' in the world, my lad. Jest call on old Nick and Pizen. They kin kick up the biggest kind of a rumpus in the shortest kind of a minute!"

"Thank you. I expected to accomplish my purpose unaided, but I little knew the character of the dangers which I was fated to encounter. Three years ago my father came to this section with several others from our town, to join in the wild quest for gold which had then begun to drive men mad. For two years I heard from him frequently, and he seemed to be doing well. Then I received a letter from him, saying that he had joined an expedition to a new lead which had been struck. I have heard of him but once since that. He came here to Poker City, and met with marvelous success. The next month he was to return to me, and with a fortune. But he did not return, and for six months I heard nothing of him, waiting anxiously the while for tidings or his appearance. But neither came, until at last one of the men who went away from our town with him came back and told me that my father had left Poker City for Denver, alone and upon horseback, but that he had never been seen since. He said it was rumored that he was waylaid and robbed by a band of outlaws under the leadership of two men known as Black and Blue. I was almost overcome by the tidings, and instantly determined to come hither and learn to a certainty of my father's fate. I was living with an uncle, and, of course, he would not hear a word to my coming away upon such a perilous expedition alone, so I ran away."

His concluding declaration was spoken in a faltering tone that sounded almost like a sob. Nick gazed at his strangely-fair countenance with mingled perplexity and solicitude expressed in his keen grey eyes.

"Run away, eh?" he ejaculated, half to himself.

"Yes."

"An' don't yer friends know whar yer air?"

"Yes. I left a note explaining everything!"

"You air a fool, youngster—yes, a teetotal, 'tarnal, ornary loon—so ye air. My uncle, the doctor, would say you were mentally cobberated, so to speak. He would, by hokey, or I'm a 'tarnal polecat!"

The giant drew his massive form erect, and gazed down upon the dimly visible youth with mock savageness.

Ned Clyde made no response, but a close observer would have seen his eyes fill with tears, which crept silently down his fair cheeks.

"Then you blame me?" he questioned, his voice very low and tremulous.

"Blame ye? In course I do, on'y I don't, so to speak. Ye air a brave little cuss, on'y ye air afraid of yer shadder sometimes. Ye air smart 'nough, on'y yer've made a 'tarnal fool of yerself. D'ye 'spect to find yer father arter he's killed, and shot, and his life taken? D'ye 'spect to clean out Black and Blue and their band of ornary cut-throats? Ye did face 'em good last night, though, by cracky! I seed the hull of that performance, and thar wasn't no show of backin' down 'bout ye. And then ag'in to-night, when they had ye foul at the Blue Lightenin', ye faced 'em like a man. And hyar ye be at this minute more'n half snivelin'. You air a queer lad—'tarnal queer!"

"Where did you see me last night?" the youth asked.

"Up the canyon, when Black and Blue stopped the coach, an' you did the negotiatin'."

"You saw me then? Was it you who fired and killed one of their men before we came up?"

"It were Pizen as spoke; but I was t'other side of Pizen. Made the varmint sort of sick, which fetched on stiddy paralysis of his circulatin' functions, so to speak!"

"So that was Black and Blue's band," the lad exclaimed, musingly.

"It air supposed to be. An' 'twixt you an' I, Nick Wharton an' Pizen air goin' to interview 'em some day. They air on the war-path, an' thar's goin' to be a 'tarnal tangle'."

During the brief period occupied by Nick and Ned's conversation, Injun Jim had stood near them immovable as a statue, his dusky face expressing stoical indifference.

But at this juncture he turned suddenly, with an angry grunt.

"See therel They got straight flush on me, now. They heap mean scallawags—ugh!"

The savage spoke rapidly, pointing toward his dwelling. His companions glanced thither, and Ned uttered an ejaculation of amazement. A lurid tongue of flame shot upward, then another, and in a minute the rude dwelling of Injun Jim was enveloped in a blaze, illuminating the scene with startling distinctness. A half-dozen human forms were visible dancing about the burning house, and the sounds of their drunken, gleeful shouts came faintly to the ears of our friends.

"It air a 'tarnal mean trick, by hokey!" exclaimed Nick, indignantly.

The savage made no response, but in the lurid glow of the fire his face looked hideous in its vengeance.

Suddenly one of the yelling ruffians started at a swift pace toward the defile, at the entrance of which Injun Jim was standing. And in a moment his comrades followed.

"They see us—we mus' run ag'in, or they flap us, heap!" uttered the savage.

"Kin you run a little ways funder, youngster?" Nick asked, as Ned Clyde sprang to his feet.

"Yes, if not too far. But why can they not follow us?"

"They kin, ef they wants to. Let ole Nick git his back and sides pertected by rocks, and Pizen in front, and they kin foller, ef they feels like it!"

Injun Jim started at a swift pace up the defile, and Nick seized the hand of the youth and followed. They had taken scarce a dozen paces when the report of a rifle rang on the air, and Ned Clyde uttered a sharp cry of pain.

He would have fallen upon the hard rocks had not the giant caught him in his strong arms. Without a word Nick raised the light form of the youth in his arms and started on a run up the defile.

Spying a narrow opening in the wall of the canyon, Nick hastily ran toward it. Penetrating the fissure for several paces, he came to a halt and tenderly deposited his burden upon the ground.

He could hear the rapid tramping of his foes, and cocking his rifle, stood ready to repel the expected attack. He could dimly see the shadowy forms of the ruffians flitting past; he could hear their oaths and angry shouts; even their labored breathing was plainly audible. Yet they did not pause to explore the dark, narrow fissure in which Nick and his protegee were concealed.

The instant the sounds ceased Nick turned his attention to the unconscious lad. Bending over him he felt for his pulse, and listened for his breathing. He lived, but had swooned from mingled pain and weakness.

"It air 'tarnal mean that he shud be the one to git hit. I'd rather ole Nick's carkiss would git full of lead than to have one on 'em strike his tender flesh. Poor little fellow! I wonder what makes me feel so sorter spooligated, so to speak, 'bout this smooth-faced boy. Wonder if I hadn't better 'dopt him an' gin him the name of Wharton. Oh, Lord! He'd never grow big enough to shoulder the name of Wharton. Sile was shaller where he grewed. No—he'd never make a half-sized Wharton!"

While the old scout was soliloquizing thus, he had very deliberately produced a small match-safe, and proceed to strike a match.

In the narrow fissure not a breath of air seemed stirring, and the tiny blaze burned brightly, illuminating a narrow radius.

The face of Ned Clyde was deathly white, and his eyes were closed. He was breathing very faintly.

The scout made a hasty examination of his injury. The youth wore a sort of loose blouse, which buttoned close around his slender white throat. And upon his right shoulder this blouse was wet with blood, and torn completely through, showing that the bullet had not lodged in the flesh.

The match went out, and all was darkness again.

Nick could hear the faint sound of running water close at hand, and made his way toward it. He found a miniature cascade flowing from invisible heights, and hastened to fill a small tin cup which he always carried with the cool liquid.

He returned to the unconscious youth, and dashed a quantity of water in his face. But no sign of animation rewarded him. He ignited another match, and tore open the loose blouse, laying bare the shoulder and bosom of his protegee. As he did so he gave utterance to an intense cry of amazement, dropping the match in his agitation.

"Polecats and weasels, Nick! This boy air transmogrified, so to speak. He air a gal, by hokey!"

he had made. Yet he could not doubt the evidence of his own eyes—the supposed youth, who had called himself Ned Clyde, was a girl. This accounted for the signs of weakness and agitation which had so puzzled the old scout. A host of queries and conjectures flashed through the brain of the eccentric man as he crouched there in the gloom, over the strangely beautiful, unconscious being.

He struck another match, and with that gentle, chivalrous delicacy which characterized his every action, examined the wound in the fair shoulder of the girl. It was only a slight one, and had already ceased bleeding. Softly washing away the coagulated blood, the scout bandaged the injury as well as he could in the darkness, and then carefully buttoned the blouse again, muttering as he did so:

"So the boy is a gal, arter all, and Nick Wharton are fooled—yas, 'tarnally fooled. Wonder what her name air? Can't be Ned, cause that ain't feminine; can't be Sarah, cause the name ain't purty 'nough! Reckon she'll feel sort of spooligated when she knows as I've found her out. Course she will know. I'll have to tell as I fixed up her shoulder, and she must think I'm a 'tarnal polecat if I didn't find her out. But nobody kin say as I wasn't delikit 'bout it. The Lord knows as I wouldn't a laid my rough han's on sich a sweet innocent critter 'cept in mercy. One thing is sartin; nobody else in these regions shall know her secret. It would be wuss than a thousan' deaths to her if them drunken fiends knew Ned Clyde was a gal. It would, by hokey!"

At that moment he heard a slight movement on the part of his protegee, and she drew a long, quivering breath. He bent over her eagerly.

"Air ye waked up, and come to?" he asked, in a low tone.

"Where—where am I?" exclaimed the sweet tones of the supposed youth.

"You air all right, sonny, and as safe as you kin expect to be in these regions!" returned Nick, clasping one of the small hands reassuringly.

"I was shot—wounded?" said the other, rising to a sitting posture.

"Yes—yes, was hit, but I sorter tinkered ye up, so to speak. The bullet jest scratched the top of yer shoulder a leetle, but air nuthin' worth speakin' of, to a boy!" The scout placed significant emphasis upon the noun.

"Did you dress the wound? But of course you had no light!" in a startled tone.

"Ye must n't feel hard to'ard me, cause I solved the tangle, for I s'pected nothin'. But I did have a light, an' I found out as you air a sort of female boy, so to speak. But never mind—the secret is safer with me than with you, cause I kin help ye keep it, and shall know better how to perfect ye. If them 'tarnal imps as chased us hyar knew yer sex, I'd pity ye, by hokey!"

The girl remained very silent for a minute or two after the remarks of the scout, and when she spoke again her voice trembled with emotion. "You are right—I am a girl, and I suppose you think my folly greater than ever at the discovery."

"I dunno what to think, miss. I reckon ye air a trifle looney, that's all. But ye air a brave little gal, anyhow, and I'll see that no harm comes to ye if I have to die once in half-an-hour to do it. What might your true name be?"

The girl hesitated before replying. At last she said:

"I feel perfect confidence in you, and I may as well confide the truth to you, now that you know so much. My name is Edna Clyde, and at school I received the nickname of Ed., and that was in time transformed into Ned, so you can still call me that. And somewhere in these regions I hope to meet a friend—one who came hither in quest of my father, at my request, and from whom I have never heard a word. You may be sure that I had strong reasons for undertaking this perilous mission—motives stronger, even, than my desire to find my father."

To her surprise the old scout began chuckling as she ceased speaking.

"It air all clear 'nough now, by hokey. That frien' of your'n air a young feller, a masculine sort of a man, an' you air sweet on one 'nother, so to speak. That 'counts for't all. A gal will wade through fire and blood up to her eyes for the feller she likes, and a feller will go gallivantin' all over creation at the biddin' of jist one particular female woman—that is, if he's much of a feller. Oh, Lord! but it air curi's. And then—hist!"

Nick Wharton interrupted himself abruptly, and clutched his rifle tightly. The sounds of loud laughter and hoarse shouts again filled the air, coming from up the defile.

"The varmints air coming back, Ned," he whispered, "but you needn't be afear'd. I reckon Pizen and I kin take keer of ye."

Nearer came the yelling bevy, and to the horror of Ned, as we, too, shall be obliged to call our heroine for the present—they paused almost opposite their concealment.

Nick bent eagerly forward, his rifle held in readiness for instant use, and his keen gaze fixed upon the dimly visible forms of his enemies.

The moon was rising, and a sort of twilight began to pervade the scene. The giant could scarce repress an exclamation of chagrin as he recognized one of the figures as belonging to Injun Jim.

Had he turned traitor? No—that could not be, for they had burned his house, and he would not forgive the act so readily. A closer gaze showed that the savage was a captive, and that two brawny ruffians were guarding against his escape.

"Now tell us whar yer hid the boy?" a voice exclaimed—a voice which Ned and her companion instantly recognized as belonging to Black Bill.

The demand was directed to the Indian. But the latter stood erect and silent as a statue.

A knife flashed in the hand of the ruffian, and the hoarse voice was raised to a yet higher pitch.

"Ef yer don't speak, Injun, I'll cut yer tongue outen yer head as sure as I'm a livin' man. Now speak up, and that mighty sudden."

"Me don't know wher they went. Likely they run'd somewhere else. Me los' track!" returned Injun Jim, with stoical indifference.

"That's a lie, Injun. They was with yer in yer shanty, and yer've hid 'em somewheres. The cusses insulted Black Bill, and they insulted the Blue Lightenin', an' what's more, they've got to be pin-feathered, ef we hev to bust the hull of Poker City to git 'em!" yelled the outlaw, springing toward the savage. By a quick movement the latter freed himself from the grasp of his guards, and, to the horror of our friends, bounded toward the place of their concealment. Black Bill and two others followed close at the redskin's heels, but their pursuit was suddenly checked, and in a startling manner.

The giant form of our hero shot forth from the fissure in the rocky wall, and a thunderous report awoke the echoes of the gorge. Black Bill had seen the approaching foe in time to spring aside, and the shot intended for him struck a man directly in his rear. There was a groan of mortal agony, and the stricken miner sank to the earth in a lifeless, quivering heap. At the same instant the stentorian tones of Nick Wharton rang on the air.

"Keep back, ye or'nary pole-cats, or Pizen'll give ye a dose apiece. Pizen and Nick mean business, and yer'll find yerselves in a 'tarnal tangle 'fore ye have a chance to wake up!"

The drunken bravado of the ruffians forsook them for an instant and they recoiled in dismay. Had they not possessed a leader in Black Bill, they would have abandoned the attack at once.

But Bill was a character of different mettle. He was more than an ordinary miner made savage by rum. When he was not intoxicated he was known as a border bully of the worst type. And he was something more than this, as our story will show in due time.

"Don't be skeered, boyees!" he shouted, at the top of his powerful lungs. "We kin clean out one man an' a boy, I reckon, an' 'thout much trouble. Go for 'em—down with 'em, but take the lad alive if yer kin. I want to take the sperrit outen him!"

By this time Injun Jim was safe within the fissure, and standing beside Ned. And Nick, comprehending the peril of his own position, hastily dodged within the retreat once more, at the same instant seizing a revolver with each hand.

The sounds of quick, spiteful reports rang on the air, and the bullets flattened with a dull click against the rocks, in close proximity to our hero. The giant again bent forward, and the weapons in both hands were fired simultaneously, and at random, toward his foes.

There was a sharp cry of pain, a chorus of savage oaths, and the miners sprang into the narrow passage-way, the foremost finding himself face to face with the giant. There was another spiteful crack, and the rash fellow who had led the onslaught sank down without a sound. And quickly following came another report, and this time a yell of fiendish pain rent the air.

"Back, boyees—we're all dead men if we try to face sich a storm of bullets as thial!" shouted Black Bill, who had taken care to keep himself protected behind the forms of his less prudent companions.

In a flash the survivors retreated from their dangerous position, and sought a point of safety.

As soon as their retreating footsteps became inaudible, Nick proceeded in silence to reload his weapons.

That task completed, he penetrated the retreat to the point where Ned and Injun Jim were standing.

"Have they fled?" the disguised girl asked, in a whisper.

"I reckon they're scaere at this picular p'int jest now; and I don't b'lieve they'll keer 'bout facin' Nick Wharton or Pizen or Pizen's pups ag'in right away," returned the giant, panting with excitement and the violence of his exertions.

"They got straight flush on 'em. Ugh!" exclaimed Injun Jim, in his even gutturals.

"It seemed like that from hyar. But now we must be findin' safer quarters than these 'ere. The boy hyar got hit by a bullet, and he's got to have some sleep. You say it ain't safe at the hotel—and I reckon it isn't for the boy. He's 'tarnal delikit, so to speak. Thar orter be a few up an' down honest miners in Poker City. If there air one as you knows to be a square, decent man, an' as has a shanty, show us how to find him, Injun. Ye air a decent chap if ye air a redskin, and I reckon we kin trust ye. But we don't want to lose no more time. Thar's no danger of Black Bill an' his crowd troublin' us ag'in to-night."

The savage did not reply at once, but seemed to be reflecting.

"There one man, but he heap queer. Me thinks he all right, though," said Injun Jim, presently.

"Show us the way, then. Can ye walk—think, Ned?"

"I think so, if not too far. I am very tired, and I could not run," returned the girl.

"Ye won't hev to run, in course not. I'd kerry ye in my arms like a baby 'fore I'd let ye do that. Come, Injun, lead the way."

The savage obeyed, and the trio walked forth from their concealment, down the defile and out upon the open street of the settlement.

The sky was still partially overspread by clouds, but the moon had risen, and it was not so dark as it had been before they entered the gorge. The cabin of Injun Jim was a heap of smouldering ruins, which were still blazing slowly, shedding a dull glow about upon the scene. No living forms were in sight, and a deathlike silence rested upon the scene. Along the

CHAPTER VI.

THE MINER'S CABIN.

NICK WHARTON had never been so overwhelmed by astonishment in his life, as he was by the discovery

single narrow street the trio proceeded, until at last the Indian struck into a narrow path leading off at right angles and terminating at the door of a small miner's cabin. As they approached the cabin no sign of life was visible. The savage knocked boldly upon the door with his knuckles.

There was no response.

He repeated the summons. Still all was deathlike silence. Then he raised the latch—the door swung inward, and he found himself enshrouded in the dense gloom of the apartment.

Nick followed, pausing upon the threshold, while Ned stood by his side, his cheeks pale with anxious expectancy.

The sounds of heavy breathing came to their ears. It was plain that the cabin was occupied, but that the occupant was buried in slumber.

Nick gave a quick, loud knock upon the open door; there was a sudden snort from the roused sleeper, and then the sound of someone springing to his feet.

"Who is there?" exclaimed a sharp, metallic voice.

"Me—Injun Jim, and a pard—two pards. Heap tired—want place to sleep," returned the savage.

A match was struck, and the next instant a dull light illumined the small room. A tall, heavily-bearded man confronted them, and bent a keen, searching glance into the faces of the intruders.

As his keen eyes fell upon the white, beautiful countenance of the disguised girl, he started back with an exclamation of intense amazement.

CHAPTER VII.

TOM BOWKER.

"WA-AL, pard, who'd a thunk we'd come together ag'in arter all these years? I declar', I skeercedly knowed ye at fust, an' I'll be blowed if I sh'udn't a passed ye by 'thout even a nod ef I hadn't ketched the twinkle of them blue eyes of yourn. 'Course yer knowed me to onct, fur they say I hev'n't changed none to speak on. Am a grain greyer, an' mebbe not quite so spry as in the old days, but I'm the same old galoot, arter all."

The scene was in the bar-room of the Blue Lightning once more, and upon the morning following the incidents narrated in the preceding chapter.

There were only three men present beside the proprietor. The speaker was a tall, lank individual, with a large, cadaverous face, a prominent chin, a long, peaked nose, and heavy, iron-grey brows shading two small, intensely bright eyes set far back in his head. Upon his cheeks was a fortnight's growth of sandy-grey beard, while upon his chin and lips it appeared to possess the advantage of an additional two week's luxuriance.

He was clad in a patched suit of corduroy, his breeches tucked into his boots, and the sleeves of his blouse apparently torn off at the elbows, leaving his long, brown arms bare. His garments were glazed with grease and dirt, his large, red hands were grimy, while from the toes of his monstrous boots his bare toes protruded, as though they had grown too long for their covering, and had burst forth to enjoy the freedom of the open air.

Altogether the man was an eccentric, unprepossessing individual in personal appearance; but, as he uttered the words we have quoted, his countenance was wreathed with a smile of exaggerated good nature. He had but just entered, and had been eying one of the two occupants of the apartment very closely for several minutes. And now he had suddenly stepped forward, extending his huge, grimy hand with remarkable energy.

The other stared at him in puzzled amazement, and did not grasp the hand so invitingly presented.

"I think you have the advantage of me, sir, or else you're mistook slightly. I don't recollect ever seein' you afore," returned the miner.

The tall individual drew back a pace, his countenance suddenly looking serious, and his hand dropping to his side.

"An' yer don't know me—me? Why, pard, you've growed old powerful fast, I must admit, an' if I hadn't been for yer optics I sh'udn't a tumbled no-how. But as for me—why, my ole frien's as I hev'n't met for more' fifteen year' say I hev'n't changed a partikil in my looks. I used to look older'n I really was, yer remember. An' now I jest erbout ketch up with my looks. An' yer didn't know me, ole boy! Haw—haw! Yer do know me, fur I kin see it by yer eye. Jest like yer ole tricks, not lettin' on till arter yer'd fooled somebody. Haw—haw!"

Again the cadaverous face was distorted by a grin, and once more the red, grimy hand was extended.

The miner still stared in increased bewilderment, however, although he half-involuntarily permitted the speaker to seize his hand, and give it a shake which threatened to detach his arm from the shoulder.

"I can't recall your face, mister, the best I can do. But no doubt you've altered in your looks more'n you realize. Jest mention your name, and no doubt I'll remember that!" said the miner.

The lank stranger sobered again, but still clung to the hand of the other. There was a half-injured expression upon his face now, and his voice possessed a ring of reproach as he said:

"I hope yer don't mean ter disown yer ole frien's, pard? I wouldn't do that. 'Strue, I hain't adzackly prospered durin' the last ten year', though I've made sponds enough, an' hev' lost 'em ag'in. Been onfortunit, yer see. Made unprofitable investments, an' had ter spend payments. Ter tell the truth, bank count's a grain low just at present. Started from Denver day afore yesterday, my clo'es just chock full of yaller dust, an' nuggets an' sich. Run afoul the agents, an' got teetotally fleeced. Pard, yer ar'

gazin' into the 'xpressive countenance of a busted man. An' yit I'm dryer'n the staked plain.' D'ye tumble ter ther recket, pard?"

The man still clung tenaciously to the hand of the miner, his thin features looking very solemn. A comprehensive grin gradually settled upon the face of the bartender.

"If you're dry, go up and call out, and I'll settle the bill!" said the miner, turning away impatiently.

But the loquacious individual stepped around in front of him, that injured expression upon his face becoming more marked.

"Pard," he exclaimed, his voice sinking to a tone of mournful cadence, "yer ain't like yer ole self at all. Yer ar' free an' generous, of course, but yer ar' high-toned. Yer ax me ter drink, but yer don't step up an' bang me ag'in the bar, as yer used ter, an' say: 'Tom, let's liquidate!' That's the way yer used ter ax yer frien's. I hate ter drink 'lone, pard. Yer 'member that was a peccoliarly of my disposition when we was cradlin' together."

The miner stared at the face of his enthusiastic admirer, and there was anything but brotherly love expressed in his face, as he exclaimed:

"If you're so cussed dry as you let on, step up and pour down all the pizen you can hold. If you can get enough in to stop your clack, I'll cheerfully pay the bill. But I warn you—don't lay your dirty hands on me ag'in, nor call me pard! I never seed you afore—never heard your voice, and I reckon we were never within gunshot of one another till the present morning, and I hope we shall never git so nigh ag'in!"

The stranger stepped back and gazed reproachfully at the speaker a moment, and then turned slowly toward the bar with the words:

"I tumble—mine's red-eye—four fingers—sharp!"

The bartender poured out the liquor, and a quick, gulping sound ensued, and an appetizing smack.

"Jest duplicate that, ef yer please. I reckon 'twon't do fur me ter 'fend an ole pard by not seemin' ter 'prelate his ginerosity. Tom Bowker's best holt is 'preciation! Never mind 'bout runnin' the tumbler over, mister—jest leave it so's I kin sip it 'thout tippin' the glass too much—thet'll do nicely!"

Once more the fiery current went scalding its way down the throat of the bummer, and then he stepped back with a long breath of intense relief.

"Thank'ee, pard," he uttered, nodding to the mixer who had "tumbled" so accommodatingly.

"In course I shall 'turn the compliment 'pon the fust opportunity. 'Spectin' er remittance from a frien' in Denver 'pon this evenin's stage. In course Tom Bowker don't stay busted a great while. His frien's an' pards ar' all 'commodatin' w'en they see him imbarressed!"

He seated himself complacently upon a three-legged stool near the door, and apparently fell into a reverie, with his eyes fixed upon his huge feet which he had stretched toward the center of the room.

The miner paid for the treat without demur, and was about to leave the place when Tom Bowker suddenly leaped to his feet with a groan of pain, clapping one huge hand fiercely upon his jaw.

"What now?" exclaimed the miner, curiously, staring at the agonized face of the stranger.

But the other only groaned, swaying to and fro as though suffering intensely.

The miner repeated his question, feeling confident that some new ruse was being attempted, but curious to learn its precise nature.

"A chaw' o' terbacker, quick, pard! Jumpin' tooth-ache—ouch!"

Tom Bowker sprang into the air until his head threatened to strike the ceiling, holding his jaw with one hand, while he extended the other toward the miner to receive the coveted "chaw." Of course it was forth-coming. With desperate energy he bit off a huge mouthful of the weed, and began chewing vigorously. An expression of relief gradually settled upon his countenance, and he resumed his seat with the remark:

"Curi's, isn't it, how tremenjous quick terbacker'll stop the tooth-ache. So soothin' to the nerves, I suppose. Oblieged to ye, pard. Fortunit yer had a chaw for me. Jumpin' teeth allus make me 'bout crazy. I mought 'ave cleaned out the hull shebang if I hedn't got relief."

At this juncture a newcomer crossed the threshold. And the bartender frowned as he recognized him as the giant stranger who had interfered the evening before in behalf of the persecuted youth.

It was Nick Wharton, and as he entered, his keen grey eyes swept the apartment with a quick glance. His gaze rested longest upon the cadaverous face of Tom Bowker, and a grin of recognition lit up his countenance. He nodded to the bartender, but the latter only scowled, his huge hands clenching savagely.

"What do yer want in hyar?" Jed Paine exclaimed. Nick met the threatening look of the proprietor with a complacent smile.

"Business, boss—not pleasure this time," the scout remarked, in his deep tones. "I wanted to interview the ornary varmint as called himself Black Bill, and as raised a 'tarnal tangle with the boy in this place last night."

"And what did yer want of him?" the bartender asked, gruffly.

"On'y jest to converse with him, so to speak, mister. Reckon I could git him 'tarnally int'rested ef I sot out."

"Yer can't see him, stranger; an' what's more, I don't propose to hear a stranger run on one of my best customers. Bill Hyde is a gentleman!"

The bartender glared fiercely upon our hero, but the latter seemed oblivious of the threatening words and attitude. Nick walked quietly up to the bar,

and bending his head close to the face of Paine, exclaimed, with intense significance in his tone:

"Yer bluster won't answer, my lad, not by a 'tarnal sight. Yer knows where Black Bill has gone, an' whar he is; and it'll be the wuss for ye ef yer attempt to keep him shady. Thar's a hundred men in Poker City as would hang ye both so high as yer'd never come down 'live ef they knew what I knows. Yer air standin' on the crater of a volcano, so to speak, an' one word from Nick Wharton'll blow yer into congoostive didacks—it will, by hokey!"

The scout said this in a tone audible only to the ears of the bartender. And the dark, coarse countenance of the latter grew ashy pale, and his hand, as he raised it to his beard, trembled perceptibly.

"Wha—what d'ye mean, stranger?" he exclaimed, in a low, hoarse voice.

"If you kain't guess it out, then leave it. But you kin answer my question—whar's Black Bill?"

Nick spoke coolly, keeping his keen grey eyes fixed upon the face of the man.

"I don't know whar he went!" he replied.

"Hev'n't yer seen him since he left here last night?"

"Yes; but only for a minute."

"An' that was long 'nough for him to post ye 'bout his futur' actions. He smelt suthin' soon es he seed me last night, an' I reckon he tho't it pious policy to skin outen these diggin's 'fore I got him in a tangle; warn't thet it?"

"Mebbe it was. But he didn't say where he was goin'!"

"But you know, all the same, an' I tell ye, it'll save ye a pizen heap of diffikilty if ye tell me the truth. I'm on the warpath—Pizen an' I air, and somebody's bound to git into a 'tarnal tangle 'twixt us!"

Jed Paine hesitated, casting a hasty, apprehensive glance about him.

"I'd like to know who you be, anyhow?" he exclaimed.

"I air Nick Wharton; I call my rifle Pizen, an' ef you don't b'lieve the name is 'propriate, then let me try it on ye. I'll do it ef ye don't answer my questions!" said the giant, clutching his weapon in a way that lent significance to his threat.

"You wouldn't dar'!" uttered Jed, one hand falling upon the butt of a revolver at his belt.

Quick as thought the giant sprang backward, and a cry of amazement arose simultaneously from the lips of every occupant of the room. Tom Bowker leaped to his feet, and swung his arms wildly in the air; the two miners stared in speechless dismay; the face of Jed Paine grew ashy in its hue.

"Put yer hands above yer head, yer ornary polecat, or I'll blow yer pizen brains to glory!" cried Nick, his long rifle leveled at the head of his enemy.

The ruffian obeyed with alacrity, for there was a gleam in the small grey eyes of the speaker which boded him ill.

"Now, tell me whar Black Bill, the outlaw, murderer an' road-agent went to last night with his band of drunken pardners! No hesitatin' nor lyin', or I shall let Pizen have his way!"

A minute of breathless silence ensued. And as Jed Paine opened his lips to respond, there came from without a wild scream of mortal terror, the quick report of a pistol, and the tramp of heavy feet!

CHAPTER VIII.

NED CLYDE MAKES AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY.

NED CLYDE stared at the countenance of the heavily-bearded stranger in mingled surprise and perplexity.

In the dim, flickering light she beheld a man apparently past middle-age, with long, iron-grey hair and beard, the latter covering his face so completely as to leave only the eyes, nose and forehead visible. His skin was dark, almost to swarthinness, but she noted, even in the uncertain light, that his eyes were a deep blue.

The disguised girl experienced a strange thrill as she gazed into those singularly bright eyes, but for the life of her she could not explain why.

In a moment the stranger succeeded in overcoming his evident agitation, and in a strangely musical voice said:

"You are all strangers to me, except my red friend Jim, but I have no doubt that you are worthy of my hospitality. The best I have to offer is at your disposal; though I am not in the habit of placing so much confidence in strangers you are welcome to remain here until morning."

Ned drew a long breath of relief, and sank down upon a rude chair near at hand. "Thankee, stranger!" exclaimed Nick, proffering his great, horny hand.

"It isn't on my account, nor the Injuns, mind ye, that we ax the favor. We c'u'd crawl in anywhar. But the boy air a stranger in these parts, an' he air delikit, for a boy—yes, 'tarnal delikit, though I don't mean to imply any reproach 'pon the lad for't. He ain't to blame 'cause the Lord made him weak an' puny, more'n I be—not a partikil, mister. An' besides bein' nat'rally delikit, he got a chance shot in his shoulder, which bled considerable, an' he could'n't stan' that very well. 'Twasn't nuthin' ser'us, mister, an' I fixed it up so it's a gro'in better'n it was afore, I reckon. 'Twon't be needcessary for you to trouble yerself 'bout it!"

Ned Clyde could scarce repress a smile at the words of her eccentric benefactor. In his eagerness to make sure of the concealment of her true sex from their benefactor, he came near overdoing the matter by arousing suspicions.

The stranger bent a keen glance into the face of

the old scout, but his response was commonplace enough.

"The boy shall be permitted to rest without fear of molestation. Would you give me your names? You may call me Weston—Gilbert Weston. As Injun Jim knows, I work in the mines."

Nick complied with the stranger's request, and briefly recounted their adventures, which had led to the supposed youth's misfortune.

A menacing gleam shone from the eyes of Mr. Weston as the scout uttered the name of Black Bill. "So he is in the settlement again!" he exclaimed, as though speaking to himself, and adding:

"He is a bad character—much worse than is generally supposed. I did not know he was here; and there are others in Poker City who are but little better. It is a mercy that the boy did not fall into his hands!"

There was an undercurrent of intense feeling in the tones of the miner as he spoke, and he averted his face, as though to conceal some strong emotion.

Without further remarks he set about arranging robes and blankets upon the floor of the small apartment, for the accommodation of his guests. In the most distant corner from the others, he prepared a couch with unusual care, and when he had finished it, he turned to our heroine and spoke in a tone of kind solicitude.

"You can lie there, my boy, and I trust you will sleep soundly, and without fear of molestation. It is very seldom that anyone ever intrudes upon me, and you could not find so safe quarters as these elsewhere in the settlement!"

Ned gave the stranger a glance of deep gratitude, feeling that she had found friends, even in the midst of savage, unscrupulous foes. And in a few minutes she was sleeping peacefully, overcome with her night's perils and their consequent exhaustion.

It was long after sunrise when she awoke, and as she sprang forth from her couch she was surprised to find that she was alone in the room.

A cheerful fire was burning in the narrow fireplace, and the aroma of coffee and boiling meat filled the atmosphere with an appetizing odor. Spying a basin of water at hand, she bathed her face and hands, wetting back her short, curling locks. As she finished her ablutions, Mr. Weston, the old scout and Injun Jim entered. The former greeted her a trifle gravely, and set about preparing the morning meal, of which all partook with a relish.

Injun Jim disappeared abruptly, with a satisfied grunt, and Nick Wharton drew Ned aside and said in a low tone:

"You air not feelin' well 'nough to roam 'round much to-day, an' yer'd better stay hyar for awhile. I've got 'special business as 'll keep me away from ye for an hour or two, but Mr. Weston said you'd be safe 'nough to stay hyar. He's goin' to work, in course; an' you can sort of keep the house from runnin' 'way while I'm gone. What d'ye say?"

Ned felt lame and weary from her recent exertions, and the wound in her shoulder was sore and painful. Besides, the prospect of being alone, and in security for a short period, struck her favorably, so she replied:

"You can go, and I will remain. But I hope you will return soon, because, since last night's experience, I feel strangely nervous and ill at ease."

"I'll look arter ye, Neddy!" the scout returned as he left her.

Their host still lingered, apparently busy clearing away the remnants of the repast.

The girl stood for several minutes in the doorway, gazing after the retreating form of her benefactor. At last she turned, and beheld her host standing a few paces distant, gazing down upon her with strange earnestness.

"You were not built for these rough regions, I fancy," he said.

She looked at him sharply. There was something strangely familiar in the voice of the speaker—something which she had not noticed before.

"No; I am not very strong for a boy of my age," she replied, half averting her face.

To her intense amazement the man advanced and laid one hand lightly upon her arm, exclaiming in a deep, musical tone which thrilled her through and through:

"Your disguise is not so complete as mine, Edna Clyde. Do you not know me now?"

By an adroit movement the man removed the heavy beard which had so completely covered his features, and likewise the wig of long, iron-grey hair.

She uttered a low cry of intense joy.

"Wilbur Carleton! Oh, God be praised that you live!" she cried, and the next moment her face was buried upon the shoulder of the young man, and he was softly kissing her cheeks, and speaking to her in low, endearing accents.

"Yes, Edna, I live, though it is almost by a miracle that I am here. But how did you come to this wild, dangerous locality? I recognized you the instant my eyes fell upon you last night, but I did not dare betray the fact, for fear that your companions did not know. Do you know that you are very rash to come hither, even in the guise of a boy? You ought not to have done so, and yet it seems so good to see you again. Tell me all about yourself, please—tell me why you run such terrible risks."

She briefly recounted her experiences upon her lonely, perilous journey; how it had been undertaken because of her anxiety for him, because she had heard no word from him since his departure. And, in conclusion, she said:

"Nick Wharton, who came so opportunely to my aid last night, discovered my secret when he dressed the wound upon my shoulder. But, although I nev-

er saw him before, I could trust him fully. He has saved my life—yes, more than my life. And now tell me how you have succeeded in your mission, and why you have remained away so long without informing me of your safety?"

"I will tell you in a few words, Edna. The stage upon which I started from Denver for this place was attacked by the road-agents, under Black and Blue, and I was taken captive, in punishment for making resistance. I shot one of their men, and was doomed to lose my own life as a penalty. I was kept a captive for a long time, but succeeded at last in making my escape. Therefore I reached this mining town only a month since, and I was compelled to assume a disguise or run the risk of being shot or retaken. A number of those supposed to be respectable miners are secret members of the band of road-agents. They are a scourge to travelers, and it is seldom one succeeds in passing between this town and Denver unmolested. They take only an occasional captive, but frequent murders are committed."

"And have you learned aught concerning my father during all this period?" she asked.

The handsome face of the young man clouded slightly, as he answered:

"Yes, but nothing to contradict the report of his death which we first received."

The eyes of the girl filled with tears, and for several minutes silence fell between them.

"I must replace my disguise, or someone might observe me without it," said Wilbur Carleton.

He bent and kissed the upturned face of Edna again, saying, as he did so:

"I had resolved to remain a month or two longer, accumulate a little fortune, and then return and claim the fulfilment of your promise to be my wife. I am convinced that your father is a victim of the road-agents, and I hoped to bring Black and Blue to justice before I returned to you. I have been very fortunate in my work, for I have a secret claim which pays exceedingly well. But you know that it was not for that that I came hither, and I should have returned to you as early as I could have done so in safety."

At this moment the sound of footsteps came to their ears, and the young man hastily adjusted his disguise.

A tall figure appeared in the doorway—it was Injun Jim.

There was a wicked gleam in his murky orbs, and he exclaimed, in deep, rapid accents:

"Me chase 'em—ketch 'em—git straight flush—ugh!"

His brawny red hand clutched a knife at his belt significantly, and before Carleton could ask a question, the savage disappeared in his silent, mysterious fashion.

"He is very indignant about the burning of his dwelling," said Carleton, stepping to the door and gazing after the retreating figure of the savage.

Edna followed and stood by his side, feeling a sense of greater security in the knowledge that her best of friends was with her.

Her face grew white with apprehension as she beheld two forms flying swiftly along the street. The foremost was a white man, and even at that distance she could see that his face bore marks of a recent combat. His pursuer was Injun Jim, who came on in agile bounds, decreasing the interval between them each moment.

In his hand flashed a knife, and his dusky countenance expressed all the worst passions of his race.

On—on they came, nearing the cabin of Wilbur Carleton with each bound. They could hear the loud breathing of the white man; they could see the veins standing out like knotted cords upon his forehead. He glanced toward the open door upon the threshold of which our friends were standing, and came directly toward it.

"Help! for God's sake protect me!" he panted, as he drew near.

Quick as thought Wilbur Carleton snatched a revolver from his belt and leveled it at the fugitive, saying in a sharp, metallic tone:

"Keep away from here—you shall suffer your own penalties!"

With a yell, like that of a wild beast at bay, the fugitive came to a halt with his back against the cabin wall, and his hands clenched in fierce desperation, awaiting the onslaught of his enemy.

He possessed neither knife nor pistol, his only weapons being those nature gave him.

Edna Clyde clutched at the hand of her companion, gazing upon the scene with a sort of horrible fascination. And, at this critical juncture, a new form appeared upon the scene—the tall figure of Black Bill.

There was a sharp, quick report, a puff of smoke, and Injun Jim staggered backward with a cry of pain. He did not fall, however.

For an instant he stood irresolute, and then darted off at right angles with his former course. Black Bill was standing near the fugitive, and now he turned upon and his gaze fell upon the supposed youth. With a shout of triumph he bounded toward our heroine. The latter recoiled with a low cry of horror.

Carleton's revolver covered the outlaw in an instant. But the latter was already so close, and his action so prompt, that he was on the young man before he could press the trigger. There was a heavy blow, and Carleton sang down in a quivering, unconscious heap.

Edna comprehended her danger, and ran forth from the dwelling. Involuntarily she took a course of flight which brought her near the Blue Lightning.

And Black Bill, with a triumphant shout, bounded after her in swift pursuit.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TOILS.

THERE was something in that shrill scream of terror which went through the nerves of Nick Wharton like an electric shock. He bounded to the door, and thence out into the open air.

In an instant his sweeping glance took in the situation in all its details.

Less than fifty yards distant he beheld the slender form of Ned Clyde standing firmly erect, with leveled revolver, while the giant ruffian, Black Bill, was coming toward her with rapid bounds. This was not all—another white man, with a wicked, bearded countenance, was running toward the supposed youth.

Nick Wharton did not hesitate an instant, but leveled his long rifle at the flying outlaw. There was a loud, ringing report, a howl of rage and pain, and the ruffian staggered backward and fell to the earth. But Black Bill kept on with dogged tenacity, and the next instant he clasped the slender form of the disguised girl in his arms, raised her as though she were an infant, and darted away across the level tract of land toward the entrance of the canyon. For a moment our hero was in a quandary. He was fully sixty yards distant from the outlaw, and to fire upon him with a revolver would endanger the life of his captive. There was only one thing to be done—to start in immediate pursuit. And he acted upon this at once.

Although Black Bill had a burden, it was evident at the outset of the chase that his fleetness would equal that of his pursuer, and therefore he was sure of reaching the shelter of the canyon. On bounded the giant. Once he glanced backward, and beheld the occupants of the saloon standing outside watching the chase in breathless interest.

"Come on an' help me catch the varmint. He's captured Ned Clyde, an' the boy air 'tarnal delikit!" he shouted, making a beckoning gesture to the spectators.

The miner upon whom Tom Bowker had so successfully practiced his arts seemed to comprehend the situation at a glance, and with a shout joined in the pursuit.

It was a wild, thrilling race—a race upon which even more than human life depended.

The onslaught of Black Bill had been so quick and powerful that Ned Clyde had no time even to fire, except the single shot which had brought Nick Wharton upon the scene; and as the powerful arms of the outlaw clasped her in their resistless embrace, she found herself powerless to move. Her arms were helplessly pinioned, and so tightly was she held that she had not sufficient breath to cry out. Half overcome by the horror of her situation, she was dimly conscious of being borne swiftly along, and conscious also that someone was in pursuit.

She could see the dark, ferocious countenance of her captor, the veins standing out upon his forehead, his lips parted, his breath coming in quick, powerful gasps.

She could hear also the heavy tramp of pursuing feet, and realized that her hope of rescue depended upon the fleetness of her friends.

Even in her own peril, her mind reverted to her lover whom she had left stricken down by a blow from her powerful enemy. Had he recovered, and was he the one who was pursuing so vigorously? As she asked herself the question, it was answered by the call of Nick Wharton. And somehow the knowledge that the giant scout was coming to her rescue lent her new hope and confidence.

At this moment she was conscious of entering a place from which the sunlight was excluded, and the footfalls of her captor rang sharply upon the hard rocks. She knew that they had entered the defile leading into the depths of the mountain wilderness.

And now the sounds of pursuit became more indistinct, and soon they ceased altogether.

Had it been abandoned? or had her captor outstripped them in speed? Gradually a sense of intense horror came over her as she realized that she was helplessly in the power of an unscrupulous enemy. And the thought came to her that it was a little strange that Black Bill should be so eager to persecute her when he had never seen her until the night before.

He could not have become her implacable foe in so brief a time. Nor had she given him cause for offense, save in opposing his will when he had attempted to force her to drink the glass of liquor.

Did he suspect her true sex despite her disguise? Had she betrayed herself in any way? Heaven help her if such was the case.

On dashed her captor, his powerful muscles seeming tireless, although he breathed gaspingly. Presently he made an abrupt turn to the left, then paused, seemingly to listen.

No sounds of pursuit were distinguishable. A death-like stillness prevailed.

Bill loosened his embrace of the captive, and abruptly set her upon her feet, but clinging to her arm with a fierce grip.

Edna was so overcome with terror and apprehension that her limbs seemed scarcely able to sustain her weight. But by a powerful effort at self-control, she stood erect and cast a quick glance about her.

They were in a narrow channel, evidently a branch of the main canyon. Upon every side arose high, jagged rocks, with dark caverns and narrow fissures and gigantic boulders lying about in every imagina-

ble position, as though cast thither by the hand of some giant—and so, indeed, they were.

Black Bill drew a long breath of relief, cast a triumphant look into the face of his captive, and then placed his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill, ear-splitting blast that seemed to be repeated from a score of different points.

In reality, however, there was no answer, only that given by the echo.

Several minutes of silence ensued. There were sounds of rapid footfalls, and the next instant a dozen men issued in single file from a fissure in the rocky wall.

All were coarsely clad and armed to the teeth, while their faces were hidden by masks, several of which were black, while about an equal number were blue.

"I've got the lad, boys, but that big galoot as calls himself Nick Wharton is in pursuit, with two or three miners. He means death to us if he finds us out, and he's no slouch at fightin'. Form an ambush and captur' the cuss alive ef yer kin, an' riddle him with lead ef yer can't take him that way!"

Bill spoke in a voice of command, and then turned his gaze upon the countenance of his captive.

"Now, youngster, I've got to blindfold ye, an' ye must as well submit 'bout any fuss!"

His grasp tightened upon the arm of our heroine, but the latter was too terrified and apprehensive to remonstrate or make response.

The process of blindfolding occupied but a minute of time, and then Edna was conscious of being half-led, half borne over a rough surface, steeply descending in grade.

It seemed as though her guide would never come to a halt—that she was descending into the very bowels of the earth. She knew by the cool dampness of the atmosphere that they were underground, and she was conscious of being led by winding routes, and abrupt angles, until her head spun dizzily and she became half unconscious with weariness.

At length her captor came to a halt, and removed the bandage from her eyes. For a moment she could see nothing distinctly. But gradually her eyes became accustomed to the semi-gloom pervading the place.

She found herself in a large, vaulted apartment, its walls of rugged rocks, its roof hung with stalactites which glistened and glimmered, seeming to present a small firmament of stars.

There was no furniture save a small, rude table, upon which was an oil lamp. Utter silence pervaded the place, and there was an unpleasant chill in the atmosphere, which caused the girl to shiver involuntarily.

Black Bill released his grip upon her arm, and bent an intense glance into her face—a glance of gloating triumph, which filled her with a nameless dread.

"These are yer quarters for the present, youngster, an' I warn ye, it'll be wuss 'n useless for ye to tempt to 'scape. Yer'd only git lost ef yer tried, and I sh'd be the one to find yer. Make yerself at home till I come back!"

The outlaw spoke in a low, significant tone, and then turned and disappeared, almost before she divined his intention.

With a long breath of relief Edna Clyde sank down upon a heap of skins at one side of the apartment, too thoroughly exhausted to look about her, even.

She was conscious of a sensation of pain and soreness in her wounded shoulder, and she felt sick and faint. Rapidly the memory of the morning's adventures flashed through her brain. She had heard the ominous commands of her captor before they had entered the cavern, and realized that her giant protector was in deadly peril. If he were killed or taken, she could scarcely hope for succor. It seemed to her that her situation was almost hopeless. If the outlaw did not already suspect her sex, he would soon discover it if she were retained in captivity.

And she was filled with a deep anxiety for the safety of her lover also. She knew that he would recklessly brave any peril to attempt her rescue. And for the first time she repented the mad impulse which had impelled her to come to this wild locality with no protection save her disguise, which Wilbur Carleton had penetrated at a glance.

For a long while she reclined upon the heap of skins, her brain intensely active, yet with a desultory train of reflection which savored more of a sleeping fantasy than of waking thoughts.

At last she fell asleep, and for a long time—how long she had no means of judging—she was lost to all realization of her situation.

When she at last awoke it was with a sensation such as one experiences in the presence of an unseen danger. For several minutes she remained motionless, her eyes closed, yet conscious of the presence of some human or brute enemy.

A nameless horror restrained her from unclosing her eyes. Her form shook with a strange, unnatural chill, which the dampness of the atmosphere alone could not have caused. A death-like stillness filled the place, yet she dared not open her eyes. What held her in that resistless spell? Was a man or beast crouching near at hand, ready to spring upon her the instant she moved?

The sense of suspense was terrible, and it held her in resistless bonds. But at last the spell was broken—the unknown presence manifested itself by a movement, and betrayed its character at almost the same instant.

"Ho-ho! um playin' possum, I reckon!" exclaimed a singularly shrill, squeaking voice, coming from a point close at hand.

Edna sprang to a sitting posture, her eyes wide open, and falling instantly upon the being whence

the words came. She scarce repressed a cry of intense amazement.

Crouched within reach of her outstretched arm was a small, elfish creature, whose singular posture and extreme diminutiveness rendered it difficult to decide whether it were human or otherwise. But a second glance solved the mystery—the being was human, and, what was more astonishing, it was a girl, with a small face framed in a mass of jet-black curling locks, and illumined by two large, intensely bright eyes.

"Um waked up, ain't um?" the strange being uttered, as Edna gazed upon her.

"Yes, I am awake," our heroine answered, not knowing what else to say.

"Um playin' possum minute ago," added the elfish creature, rocking itself to and fro.

"How do you know that?" the captive asked.

"See um eyelids shake and um cheeks grow white. Black Bill fetch um here!"

The girl spoke in a questioning tone, bending forward, as though intensely eager for the reply.

"Yes, he took me captive. And do you know Black Bill?" Edna returned.

"Know 'im? Reckon I do. What 'im want of you anyhow? Do 'im no good to fetch boys here."

"I do not know what he wished of me. I never saw him till last night."

"When him bring man here?"

"I do not know how long ago. I have been asleep."

"Ho-ho! Um tired—I see. Um not very strong boy, I reckon. Things not allus as they looks sometimes."

The strange being rocked to and fro more rapidly than before, a cunning expression in the magnetic eyes.

"What do you mean?" Edna exclaimed, feeling, somehow, as though those eyes were penetrating to her very brain with the intensity of their gaze.

"Ho-ho! Um not much boy, guess, 'ceptin' clo'es. Clo'es not make um boy—ho-ho!" was the startling response.

Edna realized with renewed horror that her secret had been ferreted out by this strange being.

CHAPTER X.

NICK IN A NEW "TANGLE."

WILBUR CARLETON lay for several minutes stunned by the blow from the powerful hand of Black Bill.

And when he recovered and sprang to his feet, at the recollection of Edna's peril his head swam so dizzily that he could scarce retain an erect posture.

But he regained his powers in a minute or two, and at that moment the sound of a pistol shot came to his ears.

He glanced in the direction whence it proceeded, and beheld Black Bill in the act of seizing the supposed youth.

Carleton uttered a cry of dismay, and staggered forward, and as his limbs grew stronger broke into a run. He beheld the giant scout in hot pursuit of the enemy, and coming as they did from opposite points, they soon came together, and dashed on side by side.

"You hyar, too? Thought you war at work!" exclaimed Nick, as he recognized Carleton.

"No, I had not begun my day's work, and the youth was snatched almost from beneath my very eyes. We must overtake that fiend at all hazards!" returned the young man, pantingly.

The scout gave him a keen, questioning look, but made no response. They could not afford to waste their breath while running so rapidly, and therefore neither spoke for several minutes. They saw the outlaw enter the defile, and then lost sight of him altogether.

"He's got the start on us, an' I reckon thar's no use chasin' him, 'specting to ketch him. The best we kin do is ter foller as cluss as we kin and find whar he hides the lad," said Nick, at length.

"We must overtake him!" uttered Carleton, betwixt his set teeth.

"Yer air 'tarnally int'rested, I sh'u'd think!" returned the giant, giving the other a second searching glance.

"And why should I not be? But you do not know, I can trust you, however, for you know that Ned Clyde is not a boy—you know something why she came here. My name is Wilbur Carleton, and Edna Clyde is my betrothed wife. That is all I can tell you now. I will reveal the rest some other time. But you must still call me Weston, for there are those in Poker City whom it would not be safe for me to reveal myself to."

"Polecats an' weasels!" ejaculated the giant. And then he relapsed into silence, his brain busy working upon this new discovery, and linking it with several other incidents which had come under his notice since his coming to this section.

Of a sudden he came to a halt, with an exclamation of chagrin and disappointment.

Carleton halted also, and glanced at his companion in surprise.

At the same moment the miner, who had come from the Blue Lightning and joined in the pursuit, came up with them, panting with his exertion.

"Why do you not go on?" questioned Wilbur, in a tone of impatience.

Nick Wharton pointed toward a narrow defile branching off at right angles from the main canyon.

"The tarnal varmint went that way, boys—thar's the marks of his feet in the sand," he said.

Carleton bounded toward the point indicated, but the giant leaped upon him and restrained him with one powerful hand.

"Don't yer do it! Yer vally yer own life, an' thet of the boy," cried Nick, sharply.

"Why not?"

"Because you'll fall into a tarnal tangle. Black Bill knows whar he's goin' better'n we do."

The miner, who had until now said nothing, exclaimed:

"There's something 'bout these doin's as I don't understand. Who is Black Bill, anyhow?"

"One of the leaders of Black and Blue's road agents, I reckon," returned Nick, quietly.

"No other than Black himself," added Carleton.

"If that's the fact, I'm thankful I've joined in the chase. They fleeced me oncet, and I don't owe 'em any good will," said the miner, a shadow of anger crossing his dark, bearded face.

At this juncture the sound of an approaching horseman smote their ears, and all bent their gaze expectantly up the canyon, their hands clutching their weapons.

Nearer and nearer drew the clattering hoof beats, and the next instant the horseman came into view.

The trio uttered simultaneous cries of amazement.

Coming toward them at a swift gallop was the Phantom Horseman, that mysterious headless rider upon whom Nick Wharton had tested his marksmanship two days before.

"Pale Jack!" exclaimed the miner, in an awed tone.

"And who is Pale Jack?" asked Carleton.

"I don't know his other name. Everybody called him Pale Jack."

"Hist! he's come to a halt," said Nick, placing his hand upon the shoulder of Carleton.

Sure enough the headless rider had stopped abruptly at a point nearly one hundred yards distant, and stood as motionless and silent as though carved from stone.

Quick as thought, Nick Wharton leveled his rifle and fired. The report rang out clearly, and the rocks sent back the sound with rattling reverberations. But there was no movement on the part of either horse or rider to indicate that either had been struck.

For a full minute the mysterious being remained perfectly motionless, and then it abruptly wheeled in its tracks and galloped back up the defile.

"What do ye think of that-tangle?" exclaimed Nick, as he reloaded his rifle.

"It is a mystery which I cannot solve. But, of course, there is nothing supernatural about the being," returned Carleton.

"Bullets don't hev' no more 'fect on it than hail-stones!" exclaimed the miner.

"D'ye ever see it afore?" asked Nick of the former.

"Only once, and then it was by night, and I considered it mostly an optical illusion. But I have heard the miners allude to it a great many times, and I have heard it said that men have been found dead in the canyon, and that they were not robbed, either, and, consequently, their death has been supposed to be at the hands of this strange rider."

"What sort o' men hev' met their death in that way?" Nick asked.

"Miners from Poker City."

"Good, pious miners, so to speak?"

"I do not know."

"I reckon I know. Zeke Sykes—poor old man! I reckon he's gone under—told me suthin' 'bout it. He said Pale Jack was robbed twixt Poker City an' Denver, an' it was reckoned he was murdered, too. Ef that's the case, I don't b'lieve his ghost is goin' 'bout slayin' honest miners, not by a jurned sight! An', what's more, that critter's jest as much alive as you an' I be—it air, by hokey! The hull tangle is, that Pale Jack didn't die when he was killed, so to speak. That he was sorter spooligated an' went into jellywinkers. Oh, in course, that's how it air!"

Nick Wharton averted his face and gazed dreamily down the canyon, apparently falling into a reverie.

But Wilbur Carleton was too thoroughly alarmed for the fate of Edna Clyde to remain long inactive, or to have his mind diverted by the strange rider. He laid his hand heavily upon the shoulder of the giant, saying:

"We must not waste another moment standing here. I leave our future course to be decided by your superior judgment. But what we do must be done quickly!"

The young man spoke eagerly—so earnestly, in fact that the miner gave him a quick glance of suspicion.

"Don't be too fast, my frien'. Kain't do things jes' as we'd like to, sometimes, an' I reckon this is one of the sometimes. We must wait till evenin' an' then come with a squad of good men."

"What do you mean, Wharton?" exclaimed his companions, in the same breath.

"Jest this, boyees, to simplify the tangle," said Nick, lowering his voice.

"I kem hyar on the warpath, so to speak, an' the partic'lar varmints I'm arter air Black and Blue an' their gang. I've been rovin' 'roun' in these mountain passes an' gorges an' sich fur more'n a month. An' I reckon I hev'n't scouted fur nothin'. This ere narry defile leads to the stronghold of the varmints, an' thar's whar they've kerried the lad. Ef we could overtook Black Bill it would 'a' been a more pious way of savin' the boy, but as we couldn't do thet, we must do the next best way."

The face of Wilbur Carleton turned pale at the thought of leaving his betrothed so long at the mercy of the outlaw fiends.

"You know his danger, of course," he exclaimed, with a significant glance into the face of the old scout.

"In course I does. But it kain't be helped, an' I reckon no harm'll come to him to-night!"

"What shall we be doing in the meantime?" Carleton asked.

"Go back to the city an' pick out yer men. Both on ye know 'em better'n I do, an' we don't want any but good uns."

"And you?"

"Shall do a little scoutin' an' spyin' and sich. I'll meet you at the entrance of the canyon at ten o'clock. Be on hand, an' with all the good fightin' men ye kin git together. We don't want no slouches 'mongst 'em!"

Carleton assented, and shaking the hand of the old man warmly, moved away down the canyon toward Poker City. Nick watched them out of sight, and then started at a swift walk up the gorge. For several minutes he kept on this course, until he came to another narrow defile leading at right angles from the main gorge. He struck boldly into this, and soon found himself ascending a steep, rocky grade. At length he reached a level plateau, beyond which was a steep, precipitous descent, leading to the bed of a small, gurgling brook. Down this perilous way the intrepid man descended, going slowly, cautiously, and keeping a sharp lookout upon all sides for enemies. At last he reached the bed of the brook, and felt the small stream splashing against his feet, its depth reaching scarce to his ankles.

The water-course was so deep and narrow, and the rocks above came so near meeting and obscuring the sky altogether, that a sort of dim twilight pervaded the place. Consequently, for fear of making a misstep, he proceeded with utmost caution.

Suddenly he was brought to a halt by a stealthy sound in his rear. He looked backward, but in the gloom he could see nothing.

He stood and listened intently for several minutes, but all was still as death. Again he resumed his course, walking more noiselessly than before. And once more those stealthy sounds came to his ears.

There could be no doubt in the matter—someone was dogging his footsteps with silent persistence.

The scout halted again, and spying a niche in the wall of the passage, made haste to conceal himself therein. For several minutes he remained in his concealment, listening for a renewal of the sounds.

And at last they were renewed, and he was convinced that some one was approaching at a cautious pace. But he could see only a short way up the water-course, and within range of his vision no living object was in view.

But the footsteps came slowly and surely nearer, and at last a human figure came in sight.

Nick cocked his rifle, and held it in readiness for instant requisition.

He soon saw the approaching person with sufficient distinctness to be assured he was white. And in another moment he was convinced that he was an outlaw—a member of Black and Blue's band.

For a moment he was at a loss what to do. He did not wish to betray his presence in the vicinity by firing his rifle, for he knew its thunderous report would betray his identity to all who heard it.

He was aware that he was in close proximity to the road-agents' retreat, and, therefore, caution was doubly necessary to the accomplishment of his designs.

The outlaw stranger was drawing slowly nearer, moving along with the same degree of caution as that which the scout had used.

The latter silently placed his rifle against the rocks, and drew his long knife.

He gathered his monstrous powers for a spring upon his unsuspecting foe.

But just before the outlaw had reached a point opposite the concealment of the scout, he came abruptly to a halt, uttering a low ejaculation of alarm.

The next instant a revolver flashed in his hand, and he bounded toward the niche with the weapon leveled directly at the head of our hero.

Nick stepped backward, to shield himself from the threatened shot. As he did so one foot dropped downward, and before he could recover himself his form shot down—down into unknown depths!

CHAPTER XI.

PERILS UNDERGROUND.

NICK WHARTON'S heavy form struck against numerous rocky projections, which in a measure broke the force of his fall. Yet he struck with such force as to render him for several minutes partially insensible. But he soon recovered sufficiently to comprehend his mishap. He struggled to a sitting posture, but found himself so bruised and sore from his fall that it was with difficulty that he could stir. Mechanically his hand went to his girdle. To his relief he found his weapons all right.

All around him was intensely impenetrable gloom, and a strange, deathlike stillness reigned. His head spun dizzily; he felt a sense of inertia such as he had experienced but seldom during his lifetime.

The physical organization of our hero was as perfect as could be formed in the whole world, and his long life of peril and laborious exertions had told but little upon his splendid powers. Therefore he was the more alarmed at his sudden, overwhelming sense of weakness.

How far he had fallen he had no means of judging. But he was sure that the distance was sufficient, if nothing had broken his descent, to dash him to death; and his present pains and weakness led

him to fear that he was injured internally to a serious extent.

He glanced upward, and beheld a small point of greyish light, which seemed to lose itself in the intense gloom beneath. He wondered what had become of his enemy, whom he had seen coming toward him so threateningly. Doubtless he had fled from the spot, appalled at the supposed fate of the scout. At all events he gave no sign to indicate his presence.

For what seemed to the giant a long time, he sat silent and motionless, with his back resting against a perpendicular wall of rock; and gradually the intensity of his pain abated, and his strength seemed slowly returning. Accustomed as he was to rely on his own monstrous strength and physical endurance, Nick Wharton had ever attributed his miraculous escapes from death to a higher power than his own.

Without either creed or baptism, the quaint, eccentric old man was more thoroughly a Christian in simplicity of faith and conscientious living than many an eloquent professor in the great and influential churches at the east. And now, in his sudden helplessness, this characteristic kept off that torturing despair which many would have experienced.

Nick Wharton was philosophical, if not in the most scientific sense of the word, at least in a very practical way. Within his honest, ingenuous heart what was was right.

As soon as he felt a degree of relief from pain, his hopes arose with all the elasticity of youth. He staggered to his feet, and by clinging to a jutting rock, succeeded in retaining an erect posture.

"Nick, ye air in a pizen tangle this time, and no mistakel!" he muttered, finding relief in thus communing with himself.

"Reckon ye air nigh about spooligated, so to speak. Wish my uncle, the doctor, was hyar. Nick's cranium feels sorter buzzy, 'sthough a swarm of bumblebees hed gone to housekeepin' inside on't. Wonder ef my uncle wouldn't recommend amperation? Nick, ye come down here 'tarnal suddint, but ye stopped, very fortinittly, just at this point. Ef the Lord hed made the bottom of this pesky place a few feet lower, I reckon Nick Wharton would a-be'n an angel at this moint. Oh, in course he would!"

The eccentric man drew a long breath, and glanced upward again at the point of light.

"Wish the laws o' gravity mout be reversed fur about four seconds. How old Nick 'ud whiz up to 'terre firmy' ag'in, right through that identikil hole! I s'pose the Lord could do even that if it ware needcessary. But I reckon Nick'll git 'tarnal grey afore sick a mericle happins. Yes, Nick'll be orful old, an' a-growin' his seventh set o' teeth—he will by hokey!"

The giant chuckled softly at his own conceit, and then relapsed into silence once more. Each moment he felt his strength and spirits returning, and now he began to speculate upon his chances of escape.

Cautiously he groped along the perpendicular wall with his hands, stepping very carefully, for fear of being precipitated to greater depths.

He found that the soreness of his body and limbs grew less troublesome the more he exercised them, and his strength momentarily increased.

In a few minutes he was brought abruptly to a halt by a new and startling sound—the sound of human voices! He bent his head and listened intently.

There was no mistaken the fact—he could hear human voices engaged in conversation. And what surprised and mystified our hero still more was the unmistakably feminine tone of the unseen speakers.

He could not distinguish words, yet the sounds seemed to proceed from a point close at hand. And in another moment he had made a discovery which filled him with mingled wonder and delight.

A few paces distant, at a point about as high as his waist, he beheld a narrow, reddish arrow of light. This could not be the light of day—it was too dull and highly colored. It came from a lighted lamp or torch.

Stealthily the giant crept toward the object, his attention absorbed by his new and startling discovery. In another moment he was bending eagerly forward, with his eyes peering through the small aperture.

He scarcely repressed an ejaculation of intense amazement.

He beheld a large, vaulted cavern room, illumined dimly by the feeble rays of a small oil lamp.

At one side, not a dozen yards distant, was a heap of robes, and upon the latter a well-known form half reclined—the form of Edna Clyde—her pale countenance looking strangely beautiful in the wierd lamp-light. Crouching near her was another figure—a tiny, elfish girl, with a small, old-looking face, framed in a mass of dark, uncombed hair; and, as the scout bent eagerly to the aperture, he heard this singular, elfish creature speaking in a shrill, high-keyed voice:

"Ho-ho! um not a boy at all, 'ceptin' clo'es. I see t'rough it all, jes' as plain as day. Um on'y dressed up to make b'lieve boy!" exclaimed the strange being.

Nick saw the pallor of Edna's face deepen—saw her put up her hands as if to ward off a threatened danger.

"Why—why do you suspect that I am not what I appear?" she asked, her voice sounding husky with terror.

"Ho-ho! Um can't deceive Nita, if um tries. Um too pretty for boy. Um hands too long and slender, and skin too soft and white. I knows—ho-ho!" returned the girl.

The scout drew back, his great hands clenching with sudden determination. If the sex of Edna had been discovered, she could not be rescued too quickly. But perhaps there was no danger of betrayal to

apprehend from the strange being who called herself Nita.

Our hero again bent forward to listen. Edna was speaking.

"I will not deny the truth of your discovery," she said, her tone sounding firmer; "but I hope you will not betray me to Black Bill or his followers."

Nita rocked herself to and fro with accelerated rapidity, and her large, dark eyes gleamed with hidden cunning.

"Why not?" she asked, in her squeaking tones.

"Because I should not dare to have them know?"

"Um 'fraid they want um for wife, eh? I know—Nita no fool. But you no need git 'fraid. Nita not tell, 'cause it no good to her. Rather have pale gal die than see her wife of Black Bill. Nita is his wife now, an' she kill a thousan' gal 'fore she see um his wife. Yes, an' she kill him, too!"

A wicked gleam flashed from the eyes of the strange being and she spoke with suppressed vehemence.

Edna stared at the elfish face with an expression of unconcealed horror. She began to fear this singular being almost much as she did her captor. And Nick Wharton gazed upon the strange scene, trying to comprehend this new phase of female character. To his ingenuous mind, women were a great mystery. And the more he saw of the sex, the more unfathomable this mystery became.

The strange, wild escapade of Edna Clyde was to him a remarkable thing. And yet, had he but known it, women and men, too, were doing yet wilder and more eccentric things all over the world.

"You do not think Black Bill suspects what I am?" Edna asked.

"What you s'pect he fetch um here for?" returned Nita, quickly.

"I do not know. Perhaps he thought someone would pay him money to gain my liberty."

"Bill know better'n that. P'rhaps he don't know you're gal, but he s'pects. And when he come back he find out."

The heart of the disguised girl sank like lead in her bosom, and a wild desire to escape before the return of her enemy possessed her.

"Oh, Nita, my good girl, you will not let him touch me, will you? Please show me how to escape from this place before his return, and then all danger will be averted. It is for your interest as well as mine, that he should not know. You can assist me, and I know you will!"

Edna spoke in a pleading tone, reaching out beseechingly toward the strange being.

But the latter only laughed in her wicked, scoffing fashion.

"Ho-ho! If Bill sees you now he say you was gal right off. Boys don't act that way. I could play boy better than you!"

"I was not trying to deceive you then, Nita. I want you to help us. It is for your interst as well as mine to help me to escape."

"I could do better'n that, for myself. Um 'scape, Bill ketch um again. Then he know Nita blame, and punish her, and keep you. That all do me no good 'all. I kill pale gal, and then he no help hisself—see? That better way, Nita do that!"

The dark faced girl sprang lightly to her feet, laughing wickedly, and dancing about the terrified captive with fiendish glee.

Nick Wharton comprehended that his protegee was in imminent danger, and that he could not act too promptly in her defense.

But what could be done with that wall of rock between them? The crevice through which he had witnessed the scene was scarce wide enough to admit the thickness of his fingers, and only a foot or more in length.

Acting upon a sudden thought, the scout produced his match-safe and struck a light.

But the feeble, flickering blaze he saw that which caused his heart to bound with joy. Instead of the wall of rock intervening between himself and the cavern room being solid, he discovered a large hole, large enough to admit the body of a man. This, however, was closed by a large, irregular rock, and in such a way that the light could penetrate only at one point.

Once more Nick peered through the aperture. He beheld Nita still dancing around the captive, her small, dark face wearing an expression of wicked triumph. And Edna, her cheeks deathly white, had arisen to her feet, and was confronting her enemy with a resolute look. Her revolver had been taken from her, and she had no weapons save those which nature gave her.

To her horror, she saw the small, dark hand of Nita fly to her bosom, and the next moment a bright knife flashed through the air.

"Bill never have um for wife if Nita can help it! Ho-ho! Um too pretty to live! Nita like to spoil um pretty face—make 'em all scars. But it better to put the pale-girl out the way. Then Bill can't bring her back. Nita no fool!"

As the strange girl said this, she brandished her knife through the air, and in dangerous proximity to the face of our heroine. The latter retreated in horror toward the wall of the cavern, her breath coming in short gasps. Wildly she glanced about her for some means of defense. She spied a fragment of rock a little larger than her hand, and seized it in sudden desperation.

"Stand back, Nita, or I will throw this. I do not wish to harm you, but I must defend myself, and I shall, if I have to kill to!" she cried, holding the missile aloft, and nerving herself for the effort.

Nita paused, her elfish face sobering, her hand with its weapon falling to her side. For a minute or two she stood silent and irresolute, a wild, fierce light flashing in her large eyes. Then she gave utterance to a shrill scream that rang through the

vaulted room with weird reverberations. At the same instant she bounded toward the captive, her knife flashing through the air with lightning-like quickness.

Edna retreated, with a low cry of terror. Then she paused, and putting forth all her strength hurled the fragment of rock at her enemy. But in her haste she missed her mark, the missile hurtling harmlessly past the head of Nita, and breaking into fragments against the opposite wall of the cavern.

At this juncture there came a heavy, falling sound, and Nita beheld a huge block of stone dislodged from its resting-place, and fall upon the floor of the cavern. She paused with a sharp cry of dismay, for the head and shoulders of a man appeared at the opening!

CHAPTER XII.

JUST IN TIME.

FIRST the head and shoulders, and then the Titan form of Mick Wharton, emerged through the aperture, and stood erect within arm's length of the strange girl.

Edna Clyde sprang toward him with a cry of joy; but with one hand he held her back, exclaiming:

"Be keeful, Neddy, fur ef somebody else sh'd see ye act thet way they'd think suthin' was wrong. Keep cool, an' I'll git ye outen this tangle, or git busted, an' I never was busted!"

She obeyed without a word, her eyes shining with the light of renewed hope and courage.

"Who—who's um?" uttered Nita, recoiling involuntarily before the calm gaze of the giant stranger.

"Thet air makes no difference to you, gal, ceptin' I'm a frien' of this lad. In the fust place fling down thet knife, and be toler'ble spry 'bout it!" exclaimed our hero, in his thunderous tones.

But the intrepid being only returned his gaze with fearless defiance, clutching her weapon more tightly than before.

"D'ye hear, little gal?" demanded Nick, fiercely, striding toward her.

"What um want? Bill come, and you get glory then," returned the strange creature, retreating backward, but still meeting the magnetic gaze of our hero.

"Let him come if he wants to, and his whole pizen caboodle of white and red varmints. I ain't afeared!" shouted Nick.

As he spoke, he bounded toward the girl, and before she could elude him, one huge, muscular hand grasped her arm with crushing force, causing her to drop the weapon. The next moment he had produced a stout thong, and bound her securely, hand and foot.

Then he bore her to the heap of skins, and placed her thereon, saying:

"Now ye kin yell, and grind yer little teeth jest all yer please, and it'll do ye 'tarnal' little good, I reckon. When Black Bill and his imps come, ye kin giv 'em the respects of Nick Wharton, and tell 'em his uncle was a doctor."

The girl made no response, but lay in sullen silence, watching the movements of her foe furtively. Nick turned to Edna, and said in a low tone:

"I reckon we kin git out the same way thet I come, ef not quite so 'tarnal' quick. We'll try it, anyhow, rather than to trust that imp of Satan to show us the way."

Edna seized his hand and gave it a quick, grateful pressure, but made no response. They soon found themselves upon the opposite side of the opening, and Nick groped his way back to the point where he had landed from his fall.

"How did you know where to find me?" Edna asked, as she stood by the side of her rescuer in the gloom.

"The Lord sent me, Ned, and nobody else. I sorter rained down from above, so to speak. I landed right hyar, and I landed 'tarnal' heavy. Reckoned I'd have a jelliwinker at fust, but thank the Lord, I didn't. I reckoned a mistake had been made when I found myself comin' down 'mong the rocks, like as though I was a cannon ball fired from the moon. But I see the Lord knew why I was to hev the fall. Ye air a delikit little bein', and I was the one to pectect ye. I wouldn't mind a dozen sich falls, ef I could save ye from a 'tarnal' tangle. Now, the question is, ef we kin manage to crawl up through thet hole. Air ye used to climbin'?"

"Not very much. But in my present garb I could succeed better than in my proper habiliments, I fancy!" she answered.

"I reckon ye kin, too. I didn't try to go back the way I kin, 'cause I wanted to 'xplore' the place fust. But I counted on lightin' out thet

way. P'rhaps I'll hev' to go fust, and find out how diffikilt it air!"

Before his companion could reply, the scout began the ascent. To him it was not a difficult task. He reached a narrow shelf of rock, and then called back to her:

"Git hold and pull yerself up as fur as yer kin, an' I reckon I kin help ye easy the rest of the way!"

She reached upward, seized a jutting rock, and drew herself as far as possible. Then the strong hand of the scout grasped her arm, and the next instant she was by his side upon the narrow rock-shelf. The rest of the ascent was comparatively easy. A minute later they were in the niche whence the scout had so unexpectedly descended.

Now Nick Wharton paused to listen. All was deathly silent; not even the bark of a coyote or howl of a wolf broke the stillness. To the surprise and satisfaction of our hero, he found his long rifle where he had left it. Evidently it had escaped the notice of his enemy at the moment of his fall. He grasped it with a sigh of relief.

"I was a-feared I'd lost ye this time, Pizen, I was, by hokey!" he exclaimed, looking at his trusty weapon with something like a genuine sense of affection.

"Where are we now?" Edna asked, looking apprehensively about upon the desolate scene.

"Right hyar, Neddy; can't yer see whar' we air? It air a 'tarnal' ways from Poker City, I kin tell ye, and what's more we sha'n't hev time to git back thar' afore night. Ef we kin git back to the canyon afore dark we may count ourselves fortinit. Then thar'll be business for me. Thar's goin' to be a 'tarnal' tangle 'mongst Black and Blue's men to night, and Nick and Pizen air goin' to take a hand in it. Poor Pizen come nigh missin' the scrimmage."

Nick said this in a cautious tone.

"What do you mean?" Edna asked.

"Never mind; I hev'n't time to tell ye now. Hist! thar's somebody comin' up the defile at this minit. Keep outen sight, and I'll take keer of the varmint, whoever he air."

Edna drew back and crouched behind a jutting rock, which, with the towering form of her protector, completely concealed her.

The sounds of rapid, heavy footsteps grew louder, and the next instant the figure of the outlaw, whom Nick had encountered just previous to his fall, came into view.

Nick's hand grasped his knife firmly, and before the ruffian was aware of the presence of a foe the giant was upon him, clutching his throat so tightly that he could not even utter a cry to signal his friends.

So sudden and unexpected was the onslaught of the scout that the ruffian could make but a slight show of resistance. He was borne to the ground, with the ponderous knee of his enemy placed with crushing force upon his breast.

Edna covered her face with her hands to shut out the horrible spectacle. She heard a heavy, sodden blow, a low, gurgling cry, and then all was still. She looked up and beheld the old ranger coolly wiping his knife upon his breeches, and gazing keenly up the defile.

"We must light outen hyar, Neddy. More'n a dozen Injuns and outlaws air comin' this way. Thar isn't a minute to lose, for thet air corpus'll betray us!"

As he spoke he seized her in his arms and ran swiftly down the defile, not pausing to take breath until he had made an abrupt turn, which would preclude the possibility of being seen by the enemy. Then he placed her upon her feet, saying:

"Ef ye air strong enough, try an' run alongside of me for a piece, fur my fall down into thet hole didn't do my constitution any good. When ye git tired, then I kin kerry ye a piece, ef they gin us chase."

The twain ran on in silence for a considerable distance, until at last the scout came to a halt to listen. At first no sounds rewarded him, but a moment later a wild chorus of savage yells and angry shouts rent the air, echoing weirdly through the defile.

"They've diskivered the varmint I flummixed a few minutes ago. Now thar'll be music. Reckon we hev'n't time to go back an' 'pologize jist now. Come on—run as long as yer kin, and when yer feel like givin' out, tell me so."

Once more they resumed their flight, and presently they came to an abrupt turn in the watercourse. At this point the defile was much narrower, and further on it became more so—so narrow, in fact, that it would scarce admit the passage of a man betwixt its walls.

Here they were obliged to cease running, and

they could not even walk very rapidly. Edna went ahead, that her companion might guard the rear.

The water reached to their ankles, and ran with a soft, gurgling sound within its narrow boundaries. The descent was quite steep, and became more so at each step.

"Are you sure where this will lead us?" the girl asked, at length.

"It orter take us to the main canyon, but mebbe 'twon't. Things air 'tarnal' onsartin hyar in Colorady, I find. The water air liable to run up hill, I reckon. Thar', by hokey! We're eucharered, sure's polecats. This air air a 'tarnal' tangle, an' no mistake!"

The giant halted abruptly, and so did his companion.

They found their further progress barred by a high, perpendicular wall of rock!

"Now what are we to do?" demanded Edna Clyde, her cheeks growing pale with renewed apprehension.

The scout made no reply.

The place was shrouded in gloom, almost equaling that of night. The giant bent forward, listening intently.

"That water has to run somewheres, anyhow!" muttered the man. "An' I'm bound to find whar', ef I hev' to bu'st suthin'."

A moment later he uttered an exclamation of joy.

"We're all right, boy, ef I kin squeeze through. The stream makes a sudden turn right at this pint, an' it goes through a 'tarnal' narrer place. But I reckon it air wider jist beyond. Foller me!"

Nick Wharton bent and slowly pressed his way through the aperture, followed closely by his companion.

As the scout had divined, the passageway was more spacious beyond this point, and they once more moved onward at a rapid pace. They could hear no sounds of pursuit, and Edna began to breathe freely again. But, at this juncture, they beheld two shadowy forms a short distance ahead, coming toward them at a rapid pace. There was no chance for concealment; flight in an opposite direction was more hazardous than to remain still. And so Nick stepped directly in front of his companion, and leveled his rifle. The strangers were within a dozen yards, but the gloom hid their faces.

"Halt, or Pizen speaks to ye!" Nick commanded, in his thunderous tones.

They obeyed, and there was a brief interval of silence. Then a familiar voice responded:

"No shoot—git straight flush on Injun Jim, you do. You big scout, Nick Wharton?"

Edna uttered a low cry of joy. The scout lowered his rifle and strode forward, and in another moment they were standing face to face with Injun Jim and—Tom Bowker!

The cadaverous face of the latter assumed an expression of such pent-up joy as it would seem impossible to counterfeit. He seized the hand of our hero and gave it a crushing grip.

"By all the powers, pard, arter ten years we're face to face ag'in. That's it, shake hard; squeeze my flip into a screwdriver ef yer wants to! Bang me right down ag'in' the rocks, an' mash me all inter jelly! Yer can't hurt me enough, ef yer tries. But sure's my name's Bowker, I didn't know ye this mornin' when yer kem inter the Blue Lightenin'. I sw'ar, I didn't tumble. Sh'd a axed ye ter guzzle every partikil o' moisture in the shebang ef I'd knowed ye; singlar, wa'n't it, thet I sh'd'n't a recognized an' ole pard o' fifteen years standin'?"

"Yer c'd a-knocked Tom Bowker down with a goose-quill ef yer'd tried, arter yer went out, an' they tol' me who ye war'. Hope ye don't feel sore 'bout it, 'cause I'd no more kept closed on ye as I did than I'd a-swallowed a pint o' strychnine—no, pard, not while I kin use my voice will I go back on an old frien' o' fifteen years' standin'!"

"Waal, hev' yer got through, stranger, or air ye goin' to begin again purty soon? Yer lungs air weak, I should say, for it air 'tarnal' hard for ye to say anythin'! Spooligated, air ye?" Nick exclaimed, staring at the loquacious individual in mingled perplexity and amazement.

Bowker burst out laughing in a silent, exaggerated way.

"Jest like ye, pard, to speak in that way. But I tumble! We haven't time ter recall old times now. I'll see ye at the Blue Lightenin' later, an' we'll liquidate!" he said.

At this moment Injun Jim interposed.

"Too much clack—clack! Heap! Make straight flush, you show hand. White-faced bay all right; we go back. No git men nough to flax

Black an' Blue to-night. Wait one, two, t'ree day, then we flax 'em. Come!"

CHAPTER XIII.

PALE JACK SPEAKS.

A FEW questions from Nick Wharton made the meaning of the Indian plain. Wilbur Carleton and his companion had encountered difficulty in raising a posse of men sufficient to attack the outlaws that night, and Jim and the bumner had set out to meet the scout at the appointed place, and inform him of the fact. And Carleton also sent word that he would come and assist in the quest for Edna without waiting for a general attack upon her captors. As Nick Wharton had already accomplished the rescue of our heroine without assistance, matters for once seemed to be in a prosperous condition.

These mutual explanations were soon given, after which the quartette began their return to Poker City. An hour later, and just before sundown, Edna Clyde once more found herself safe at the cabin of her disguised lover. She was excessively fatigued, and almost famished, for she had not eaten a morsel since morning.

We will not attempt to depict the joy of Wilbur Carleton as he clasped her safely in his strong arms, with no one near to witness the act save the old scout, who looked on with a half-puzzled, half-thoughtful expression upon his weather-beaten countenance.

During the four days that followed, Ned Clyde as she was called, kept very close at the cabin of her lover, under the protection of our hero. Nothing was seen or heard of Black Bill during this period, and Ned began to feel a sense of security which she had not before enjoyed since her arrival at the mining town.

The evening of the fourth day arrived. It had been arranged that Carleton should not join the expedition against the road agents, but remain instead to protect Edna, who, of course, was to remain behind.

Nick Wharton repaired in due season to the Blue Lightning. Already a dozen miners, and two or three mountain men had assembled, several of them engaged at various card-games, and others standing in groups, conversing in low, excited tones.

The proprietor of the place comprehended that some project of an unusual character was being planned, and he even suspected the truth, but no one made a confident of him. Although the saloon was well filled with those who had formerly been excellent customers, to-night they seemed inclined to patronize his bar rather lightly.

Occasionally some thirsty miner would step up and call for a drink, but no one of them called a second time, and for once the place was filled with a quiet, orderly assemblage.

As Nick Wharton entered, he was greeted with numerous nods of recognition, for by this time he had become well-known in the mining town as the most noted and crafty scout and trailer in the far northwest.

And nearly all of them knew, also, that he possessed the ability to ferret out border villany in its various forms, and to bring the perpetrators to justice. In other words, beneath the honest, ingenuous exterior of our hero, dwelt all those faculties which go to make our best detectives. And nowhere in the world could they be exercised to better advantage, with his limited educational attainments, than in the broad field of border villany. That close attention to minute details, which is so necessary to the profession of a detective, is equally called forth by the scout and Indian-fighter.

As our hero ran his eye over the group assembled in the bar-room of the Blue Lightning, it met the odd, cadaverous countenance of Tom Bowker.

The bumner stepped eagerly forward, and silently wrung the hand of the giant.

"Everythin' is solid, pard!" he exclaimed, in a half whisper.

"Thar isn't a man in this shebang, 'ceptin', p'rhaps, the boss—as wouldn't foller you an' I to the very portals of destruction, ef we axed 'em to. Jest like the crowds you an' I used to lead up in Nebrasky, years ago. Them was warm times, wasn't they? 'Thar was whar' you an' I larned how to handle toothpick an' pop-gun. D'ye know—I ware jest recallin' them times es you come in, an' it's a fact, though a curi's one, thet them sort o' reflections make me dry—parched my throat all up! It's singular thet sich things work that way, but they do with me!"

The wide mouth of Tom Bowker grew wider yet in a good-humored grin.

"Some people air dry 'tarnal easy, I reckon,"

returned Nick. "Sort of a morbid lack o' moisture tortur's some human bein's all their days. It air a desease, my uncle would tell ye; a kind of a dryin' up of the congestive functions, so to speak. But the very wust treatment of the diffikilty is the humurin' of it. I wouldn't do it, my frien'. Ef ye're dry, drink water, 'thout d'utin' it. I never teched a swaller of the cussed pizen whiskey in my life. It air wuss'n nothin' to drink, an' 'tain't good for nothin' else. It air a man's invention, an' the Lord never had nothin' to do with it, 'ceptin' to grow the corn an' rye. I tell ye, it air pizen stuff. Jest cut yer finger a bit, an' then soak it in some of Jed's whiskey! Make ye think it was in fire—it would, by hokey!"

Nick said this in a tone sufficiently loud to be heard by every inmate of the room. There was an earnestness in his tone that was unmistakable, and his hearers glanced in surprise at his honest, humorous countenance. They had not noticed that the northwest scout had refused whenever he was asked to drink, or that he had not once tasted or called for liquor. Such abstinence was not looked for, and was therefore the more astonishing in a section where it occurred so seldom.

The men exchanged glances of surprise, and one old, grey-bearded veteran of the mines, whose proboscis testified to his familiarity with Jed's red-eye, stepped forward and grasped the hand of the scout with impulsive earnestness.

"Ycu are my kind of a man, mister—jest my kind, edzackly. I've guzzled 'nough of the pizen to fill the Miss'p, and I know it's spilt the little good thar was in me to begin on. It's a cuss to the world—it's been a cuss to me, and is likely to be all the rest of my days. Mister, ye are my kind of a man!"

The miner spoke so earnestly that every man in the room glared at his face in surprise. Nick looked at him half-pityingly.

"Thankee, stranger," he exclaimed, in his deep tones. "I'm glad ye think none the less on me 'cause I don't imbibe. I reckon ye ain't all bad, ef ye kin see good in anybody else. I've got a host of bad habits, though, but I reckon the pizenist air yarnin'. That was hereditum in the Wharton family, though. Nick on'y got his share. I hed a brother as sot out to tell yarns agin a man from Missouri. Yer'd orter heered 'em. Fust one 'ud 'late a tough 'un, and then t'other. The man from Missouri commenced to grow pale the second day arter they begun. My brother's ha'r an' finger nails dropped off the third day. Didn't neither on 'em eat nuthin'. The atmosphere got sorter blue an' sulphurous like, for mor'n three miles 'round. Which beat? Nither on 'em, an' both on 'em. The man from Missouri went into jellywinkers the fourth day, an' brother fell into violent compulsions at the same instant. Both on 'em lived adzactly five minutes arter it. Doctor Wharton was on the spot, but he couldnt do a thing to save 'em; they died. Had their funeral together, but there warn't 'nough of either on 'em to pay for buryin'. Pined away kinder rapid, ye see, and there wasn't 'nough on 'em left to die in decent shape. Doctor said it war chronic 's'pension of thar capillary functions, so to speak. Nick took warnin' an' don't yarn as much as he used to. He's concluded to confine hisself to facks, an' shootin' varmint, an' untangling tangles. Now for the mountains, boyees, and every man must be ready to live or die, whichever the Lord thinks best."

The eccentric man brought the stock of his heavy rifle down upon the floor with a loud thump as he ceased speaking, and cast a sweeping glance at the waiting men.

In an instant all were ready to follow at the command of the scout.

Out into the night they went, and with silent, rapid strides moved toward the entrance of the canyon.

A strange, unusual hush pervaded the air. Away to the eastward the sky was growing bright, showing that the moon would soon arise upon the scene.

Up among the desolate rocky fastnesses the occasional cry of some wild beast rang out, the sound lingering on the air with weird, quavering echoes. Besides these cries, however, everything was deathly still.

Nick Wharton led the way, keeping several yards in advance of the miners.

Among the latter were Injun Jim and Tom Bowker, the bumner, the latter provided with weapons, for he had expressed an ardent desire to join the expedition.

They had not penetrated the canyon for more than a half mile, before they were startled by the sharp ringing clatter of an approaching horseman.

Nick came to a halt, and his companions paused in a compact group near him.

Nearer came the hoof-beats of the approaching horse. Every eye was fixed expectantly upon the point whence they expected the rider to appear. Then a low murmur of dismay arose from their lips, and more than one swarthy countenance blanched. The moon had not yet risen, but it was not very dark at that point of the defile, and the outlines of the horseman were plainly discernible.

"Pale Jack—Pale Jack!" was uttered simultaneously by a half-dozen lips, and the speakers involuntarily drew nearer the wall of the defile, gazing the while in spellbound horror.

The Phantom Horseman, with its headless trunk and weird garb, suddenly came to a halt within thirty yards of the spectators.

Nick Wharton raised his long rifle, determined once more to test his marksmanship upon the horse.

But at this instant a deep, sepulchral voice broke the silence, and these words seemed to come from the strange rider:

"Save your bullets for your battle with Black and Blue and their men. You will need them all, for they will not yield readily. To fire upon me is a waste of ammunition in a double sense. In the first place, you cannot injure me with a volley from every rifle in Poker City; and more than that, you could gain nothing if you could do so. I am your friend, the same in death as in life, and you will find me so always. It will do you no good to attempt to fathom what no man can ever comprehend. I am what I seem to be—the ghost of Pale Jack and his horse, and until Black and Blue and their friends are annihilated I shall ride up and down this canyon!"

The voice ceased. Nick lowered his weapon, and his thunderous tones sounded in response:

"I'll take yer advice an' not waste my gunwads. I reckon ye air all right 'nough, 'siderin' the absence of yer cranium. But yer can't cram none o' yer ghost logic inter old Nick—Doctor Wharton's nephew—not by a 'tarnal sight. Yer ain't no ghost, an' ef yer stay whar' yer air ten minutes I could pull you off'n yer hoss so quick it 'ud s'prise ye. I reckon mebbe ye kin tell us ef the varmints we're arter air in their quarters? We don't keer 'bout comin' on a fool's errand!"

The miners glanced in amazement from the quiet face of our hero back to the strange object.

As they did so the latter spoke again:

"I could not tell you whether they are all there, or not. But not many of them are absent. You must use great caution, however, for their position is a strong one."

No sooner had the Phantom uttered this warning than it abruptly wheeled about and went clattering over the rocky bed of the canyon, soon disappearing around a bend.

For a moment after the departure of the mysterious rider all was deathly silent, and not a member of the group stirred from his tracks. The deep tones of Nick Wharton broke the spell.

"D'ye think that air a ghost, boyees?" he exclaimed, turning toward them with an odd expression in his keen grey eyes.

"A ghost, pard!" echoed Tom Bowker, stepping forward and confronting our hero. "No, siree! If it was a s'pectable ghost it would a varnished inter their air, instid of smashing up the gorge in that style. No, pard, I'm solid, same as I allus was on them things. Tom Bowker doesn't take no stock in ghosts!"

At that moment Nick Wharton held up his hand warningly. All distinctly heard the sounds of approaching footsteps.

The next instant the sharp report of a rifle rent the air!

CHAPTER XIV.

A STRANGE, UNEXPECTED REVELATION.

As Nick Wharton and his followers went forth from the door of the Blue Lightning, Wilbur Carleton and Ned Clyde stood in the doorway of the cabin, and watched them depart.

"God protect that noble, brave scout, Nick Wharton!" exclaimed the disguised maiden, in a low tone.

"Amen!" responded Carleton, gazing down into the face of the girl with a fond expression in his eyes.

"Had it not been for him, there is no telling what your fate might have been ere this. How can I ever reward him?"

"He is not the sort of man who does favors with the hope or wish for reward. And yet, despite his noble, magnanimous attributes, he is

the most eccentric, whimsical man I ever saw!" said Edna Clyde.

Carleton made no reply. He was gazing away toward the point whither the men had disappeared, and listening to the distant barking of a coyote, from among the wilderness of rocks.

And as he listened he caught another sound—the sound of soft, stealthy footsteps. He turned quickly, and beheld a tall, shadowy form cross the rift of light which streamed from the open door of the Blue Lightning. A moment later another figure followed the first, and then a third. Carleton turned to his companion and explained in a whisper:

"You had better remain within the cabin for the present, Edna. There are men prowling about the street now, and I do not like their maneuvers. I feel strangely nervous now that I know so few trustworthy men are left in the town."

The girl's cheeks paled slightly, and in silence she entered the cabin.

Scarcely had she crossed the threshold, when a man suddenly appeared around the corner of the house, and confronted the young man.

The latter's hand fell upon a weapon at his waist, but before he could show it, he found himself staring in the barrel of a revolver.

"No yer don't, mister. We've got the best pack of kerds this time, and I reckon ye mout as well cave while yer kin do it, an' save yer life. We wants the boyee year keepin' hid so keerful. We wants him bad!"

The voice was low, gruff, and full of significance.

Carleton comprehended that he was taken at a disadvantage. Indeed, to resist, seemed like courting instant death. Had there been nothing at stake save himself, he would have surrendered at once. But knowing what captivity for Edna Clyde signified, he instantly resolved to resist with all his powers, both in power and strategy.

"What do you want of the boy?" he asked, standing firm as a rock, and looking his enemy squarely in the eye.

"That's none o' your funeral, I reckon! What is the lad to you, anyhow? I has orders to capture him, an' purposes to 'bey orders, ef I bust. Trot out ther kid!"

"How do you know he is here?" pursued Carleton, wishing, if possible, to throw his enemy off his guard by parleying with him.

"'Cause I seen 'im. No use for yer ter try anythin' smart on me, 'cause I'm a galoot in a fight. Tell thet pale-faced little cuss ter waltz outen that shebang afore I goes in arter him. That's business, mister!"

Carleton hesitated again for an instant, in the meantime striving to form some plan of outwitting the outlaw.

There was only one thing to do—to resist openly, at the imminent risk of losing his life.

He turned very deliberately, as though to enter the cabin, and then suddenly flung up one hand, knocking the leveled revolver from the grasp of his foe.

The weapon was discharged by the movement, and the bullet whistled close to the face of the young man. The next instant he had drawn his knife, and just in time; for a gleaming blade flashed in the hand of the ruffian.

Edna Clyde heard the demands of the outlaw, and the responses of her lover; and she crouched down within the cabin, holding her breath in suspense.

Then the report of the revolver smote the air, and in another moment she heard the two men as they attacked each other in a fierce, hand-to-hand combat.

She heard the clash of steel meeting steel, the sounds of rapid, labored breathing, and then a heavy fall. The door was partly closed, and she could see nothing, although all the sounds came distinctly to her ears. At first she thought one or the other of the combatants were killed. But the sounds of the conflict continued, and she knew that both lived.

Instantly she resolved to do something to assist her lover. She had a revolver at her girdle, and she drew this and crept toward the open door. As she reached it, she arose to her feet and peered cautiously out. She could dimly discern the two struggling forms close to the wall of the dwelling, but in the gloom she could not distinguish that of her lover from the outlaw.

With wildly-beating heart she approached them, cocking her weapon as she did so.

She had not taken more than a couple of paces, however, before a heavy hand fell upon her arm, seizing it with crushing force.

She uttered a low cry of intense horror. She could not use her weapon, and the next moment

it was wrenched from her hand, and a gruff voice hissed in her ear:

"No use kickin', youngster, fur ye've got to come this time. That frien' o' yern hes erbout all he kin 'tend to now, I reckon!"

Wildly, fiercely the disguised girl struggled to free herself, but she might as well have resisted the power of a giant, so far as hope of success was concerned.

In another moment she was raised in the arms of her enemy, and borne swiftly from the spot. She could hear the rapid tramp of other feet beside those of her captor, and knew that he had companions in flight.

He ran toward the mountain defile, and soon entered its darker shadows.

He clasped one hand over the mouth of his captive, to prevent the annoyance of her outcries.

Presently he struck off from the main canyon into a deep and narrow defile. Along this he proceeded for more than a mile, when he came abruptly to a halt. Then he placed her upon her feet, though still encircling her with one arm. She glanced swiftly about her, and she beheld two other dark figures standing near, and at this juncture one of them said:

"Bill said we wasn't to go to the place that the boy 'scaped from afore. I reckon he's cussed 'ticular 'bout this kid, but I kain't 'magine what for. Nothin' 'markable 'bout him as I sees, only he's uncommon delikit. 'Spect he's got sponds."

She girl's face blanched as her captor answered, with a short laugh:

"I reckon I kin see through the mess, though Bill didn't say a word 'bout it. I reckon the boy ain't altergether a boy. Bill was particler 'bout our not hurtin' him, an' he isn't giner'ly so keerful of prisoners as all that comes to."

As the man spoke, he bent forward and leered into the face of our heroine, bringing his coarse countenance close to that of the captive!

Edna shrank back, unable to repress a shudder of intensest horror. The men all noted her evident terror, and exchanged significant glances.

"She is a gal, an' no mistake!" one of them exclaimed, with an oath.

"But how did Bill know it?" the other asked.

"Guessed at it, I reckon. I sh'ud a spected the fack myself if I'd looked at her cluss."

"What does he want of the gal? He's got one wife a'ready—'Nita."

"Spouse'n he hes? Cant a man hev' two, if he kin git 'em? This 'un 'll be spicey 'nough for him, I reckon. She fit like a tiger when I ketched her."

While the trio were talking, their captive stood white and silent, breathlessly awaiting their next move. But at this juncture a new sound came to them. A horse was galloping up the narrow defile, and it soon came into view.

The moon had now risen, and a sort of twilight pervaded the spot. They could see the approaching horseman with utmost distinctness, and they recoiled with simultaneous cries of dismay. The rider was no other than Pale Jack, the Phantom Horseman!

The grasp upon the captive loosened, and Edna found herself free. But she, too, was too amazed at the apparition to take advantage of her liberty.

The next instant the strange horseman came to a halt within a dozen paces of the spellbound outlaws. The man who had brought Edna hither was the first to recover from his fears sufficiently to take action. Snatching a revolver from his belt he leveled it with trembling hand and fired at the headless being.

The report rang sharply on the air, filling the mountains with startling echoes. But the decapitated human trunk sat motionless as a rock, and a sepulchral, mocking laugh mingled with the ringing echoes.

Edna Clyde shrank back with a shudder of horror; her captors stared in speechless fear.

They were on the point of fleeing precipitately from the spot, when they were detained by the voice of the Phantom Horseman speaking to them.

"Save your lead, I advise you, for you will need every ounce of it before another dawn; and the sooner you return to your rendezvous, the better it will be for you. You will learn after a time that bullets fired at the ghost of Pale Jack are worse than wasted!"

These were the words of the strange being, and they seemed to come from the depths of the headless trunk.

The outlaws dared not make response. The one who had effected the capture of our heroine turned quickly and seized her in his arms, and once more started forward at a swift run. But

to his entire horror he heard the clatter of the Phantom Horseman in swift pursuit. In another instant it had come up with him, and the same hollow voice said, in a tone of command:

"Leave your captive behind, upon peril of instant death!"

But the outlaw only bounded forward the more swiftly.

A sharp, quick report split the air; Edna's captor uttered a groan of mortal agony, and sat down in a lifeless heap, still clinging to his captive, and bearing her with him in his fall.

Overcome with the severe strain upon her nerves and the horror of her situation, the girl sank into unconsciousness.

How long she remained in this condition she had no means of estimating; and her senses returned to her gradually, and for a long time she seemed to be vaguely conscious of being borne swiftly through the air. Then she experienced an undulating movement, which she soon realized to be caused by the galloping of a horse. But this soon ceased, and then she was lifted by a pair of strong arms, and placed in a reclining position upon hard, cool rocks.

For several minutes she lay silent and motionless. Then she opened her eyes and glanced upward. She was surrounded by dense, chaotic gloom, and not a sound disturbed the stillness. For several minutes this continued. Gradually her brain grew sufficiently active to speculate upon her situation, and to recall the occurrences which had immediately preceded her unconsciousness.

With a shudder she remembered the appearance of the strange, headless horseman, the flight of the outlaws and death of her captor. Had her strange, terrible rescuer brought her hither? Was she in his power, or under his protection at this moment?

As she asked herself those questions she heard the sound of footsteps, and caught the glimmer of a light, which drew nearer and brighter each instant. She closed her eyes again with a shudder, dreading to behold the horrible, headless object which she expected to see.

She felt a quantity of cool liquid dashed into her face, and it seemed to lend her renewed strength and courage. It caused her to comprehend that her rescuer was ministering to her comfort—that he was her friend.

She experienced a sudden sense of security and confidence in her unknown friend, and slowly opened her eyes.

She beheld a dark, kindly face bending over her; with a low cry of intense joy she sprang to a sitting posture, clasping her arms about his neck, exclaiming, in accents of inexpressible joy:

"My father! oh, my father!"

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

A cry of pain came from the lips of a miner, mingling with the echoes of the rifle-shot.

Quick as thought Nick Wharton leveled his rifle and fired at the point whence the enemy's shot came, and another shout of pain rent the air.

"Come on, boyees, an' we'll git the varmints into the tarnalest tangle they ever was in!" shouted the giant, in his thunderous tones, starting forward at a run.

His companions hesitated an instant only, and then followed their leader, with their weapons held in readiness for instant use. Around an abrupt angle in the defile they sped, entering a narrow water course along which only two men could pass abreast.

At first they could hear rapid footsteps ahead, evidently fleeing before them, but these sounds presently ceased, and all became silent.

The miner stricken by the shot of the concealed enemy was injured but slightly.

For another hour the party kept on without interruption, at the end of which period Nick Wharton came suddenly to a halt, exclaiming in a cautious tone:

"The place whar we've got to crawl inter the varmint's hole is right hyar. I went in t'other day, and I went 'tarnal suddint, too. Gravatum fetched me down, yer see! We've got to go in one at a time, and we kain't be too keerful. This isn't ther way the outlaws go in, an' I reckon they don't know nothin' 'bout this place being hyar. Whar ther entrance air is more'n I know, an' I keer less, es long es we know one way. I'll go fust, an' you kin foller, one at a time."

As he spoke the scout entered the sort of rocky niche, where he had come so near meeting his

doom before by falling into the cavern below. Several of his companions stood by and watched him as he descended cautiously into the black abyss.

They soon heard him call softly to them to follow. And, one by one, the entire party descended into the gloom-shrouded place.

Slowly and cautiously they followed their guide, as he led them to the aperture through which he had effected the rescue of Edna Clyde.

The cavern apartment was dimly illuminated, and as the scout peered in he could scarce suppress an exclamation of joy.

There was the very heap of robes upon which he had beheld Edna Clyde, and upon it lay a motionless, silent figure—the figure of Zeke Sykes, the missing stage driver. There was no other living object in sight.

Nick hastily communicated his discovery to his companions, and then, revolver in hand, entered through the opening, bidding the others to follow as rapidly as possible. In a short time the entire party were within the cavern. Nick went softly to the side of the silent stage-driver and placed one hand upon his shoulder, shaking him lightly. As he did so he recoiled with a startled ejaculation:

"Ole Zeke air dead—yes, poor Zeke he's driv' his last stage in this world. I wonder——"

What the scout was about to say was never uttered. A light footstep sounded close at hand, and the next instant the strange, elfish girl, Nita, stood within the apartment.

For a second she stared at the armed, threatening group of men, and then she uttered a wild, piercing scream that quavered on the air in strange, startling echoes. At the same moment she sprang backward, a revolver flashing in her hand. There was a sharp, ringing report, and the giant felt a burning sensation upon his cheek, showing the closeness of the shot.

With a shout he bounded toward the intrepid girl, quickly disarming her. But before he could make her secure, the rapid, heavy tramp of many feet smote his ears, and then a loud chorus of savage oaths and shouts filled the air.

In another moment nearly a score of outlaws bounded into the room, and in less time than is required to describe the event, every man was engaged in a desperate combat for life or death. None of the outlaws were masked, and among them our friends recognized several whom they saw almost daily in Poker City, and supposed them to be honest, industrious miners. And leading the foes were two large, athletic men, one of whom was no other than Black Bill, otherwise the senior leader of the road agents, known as Black. His companion was a younger man, and far less coarse and brutal in appearance. This was Blue, which was, in truth, his surname.

The battle was a brief but terrible one in its results. The outlaws were greatly outnumbered by the attacking party, and with such a leader as our hero, they could not long oppose the odds successfully. Yet they resisted until every man was down, either killed or disabled.

The victory was a dear one to the miners. More than one soul among them took its flight to the land whence souls can never return.

Blue was killed instantly in the early part of the conflict by a pistol shot. But Black Bill had survived to the very last, and his life lingered even after his ability to fight was gone.

He lay, bruised, bleeding and panting upon the rocky floor of the cavern, and almost as soon as he fell the elfish form of Nita darted forth from her hiding-place and bent over him, uttering a low, mournful cry as she did so.

Nick Wharton stepped forward and seized the arm of the strange child-woman, drawing her away from the motionless form of the dying outlaw.

"Let him die, little un', 'cause he deserves it. The Lord kin take better keer on ye than he would, ef he c'u'd live!" exclaimed Nick, feeling a sudden sense of compassion for the strange, devoted creature. Nita looked up into the bearded face of the speaker for a moment.

"Then 'um not live anymore?" she asked, in low, tremulous tones.

"No, gal, he air bound to spooligate, this time. This 'ere air his last tangle in this world!" Nick answered.

She stood silent and motionless as a statue for a moment, and then suddenly knelt beside the prostrate road-agent, bending over him, and touching her lips to his scarred cheeks.

Then one hand suddenly flew to his belt, and before our hero could divine her purpose, she had drawn her revolver, cocked it and placed the muzzle to her bosom. Nick sprang forward to arrest the act, but he was too late. The sharp report rang through the room, and the little passionate martyr sank down in a quivering, lifeless heap upon the body of her husband.

For several minutes silence reigned in the cavern room. Then preparations for their return to Poker City were begun, those among the miners who were but slightly injured working with a will.

Nick and several others instituted an exploration of the outlaw's retreat. This occupied but a brief period, for the cavern was not an extensive one, there being only one room beside that in which the conflict occurred.

With his dying breath Black Bill revealed the hiding place of the outlaws' treasure, and that was easily found. It amounted to an almost princely sum, and it was decided that those who had been robbed and not killed should have their own returned to them, while the surplus should be divided among the brave fellows who had won the victory.

In an hour the victorious party sallied forth into the open air once more, and were soon moving slowly down the main canyon toward the settlement. They had proceeded less than a mile upon their latter course when their leader espied two figures coming toward them, evidently having just emerged from a hiding place. The scout stood in speechless wonder for a minute or two, and then strode forward with a shout.

"Ned Clyde, an' up hyar at this time o' night, an' delikit as you air? What do it mean?" he exclaimed, confronting the twain.

"Oh, it is Nick Wharton, the bravest, truest scout in the world!" cried our heroine, springing forward and seizing one monster hand of the giant with both her own, and gazing up into his face with tears of joy glistening in her eyes.

Of course a chaos of bewilderment and confusion ensued, which was only ended by the explanations of Edna's companion, who, as the last line of the preceding chapter revealed, was her father, not as a ghost, but alive and well.

We can repeat these explanations more briefly in our own words than by giving them in the language of John Clyde.

Instead of being killed by road agents on his journey to Denver a year ago, he had been captured alive, and for a month or more he was kept in captivity. Upon a certain night, however, his life was to be taken.

By almost a miracle he succeeded in making his escape, disguised in the garb of his guard whom he had killed.

His treasure had been all taken from him, and he had been half starved and otherwise abused during his captivity, until he was half-crazed by misfortune.

As soon as he found himself free he resolved to wreak a terrible vengeance upon his foes.

To carry out this design became the chief object of his existence. Securing a horse and

other materials in Denver, he got up the horrible disguise in which so many afterward beheld him riding up and down the canyon. He made for himself a sort of armor, which covered the vital portions of his body, and baffled the marksmanship of his enemies. His disguise was so made as to conceal his head entirely, which was in reality hidden within what appeared to be the breast of the figure. His robe of white, with its stains of blood, as well as the blood-red blanket of his steed, added to the weirdness of his aspect. All this, with his seeming insensibility to the shots of his foes, were effectual in convincing them of his supernatural character. During the year which he had spent haunting the mountains and canyons, he had taken the lives of a half-dozen or more of the outlaw band, and the Indians who had formerly roamed in the vicinity, had come to fear him with a deadly earnestness, and they avoided the localities where he was most frequently seen.

He had resolved to return to his home at the east a month or two later, although he had heard that his friends had given him up as dead. Of course he was overjoyed at the unexpected advent of his daughter, and he could not find it in his heart to scold her for her folly in setting out upon her perilous undertaking as she had done.

As we should fail in attempting to picture the commingled emotions of the miners as they listened to the romantic tale of John Clyde, and its stranger sequel, in the presence of the supposed youth, Ned, we shall leave it all to the imagination of our readers, knowing that they can do it better justice than we. Perhaps they could imagine all the denouement of our story with equal fidelity, but we shall tell it just the same.

Now that the scourge of Black and Blue's road-agents was removed, a season of peace and prosperity came to the honest toilers in Poker City and the adjacent mines. Wilbur Carleton, whose injuries, received upon the day of Edna's recapture, did not prove serious, was so overjoyed at her safe return, and the discovery of her father, that he urged an immediate return to their eastern home.

But John Clyde objected. He had come to those wilds to toil for and obtain a fortune, and he did not like to abandon his purpose at a time when he felt certain of success. And so it was decided that they should remain another year. But a compromise had to be effected to offset the disappointment to Carleton. And as the conditions he urged were favored with considerable warmth by Miss Edna, they were complied with.

As there was no parson in Poker City, they took a trip to Denver, going upon the very coach which was stopped by Black and Blue in chapter first of our story. But poor Zeke Sykes was not there to drive, and, wonder of all wonders, Tom Bowker undertook the job, upon one of his industrious impulses which occasionally intruded upon his habitual disinclination to labor.

The wedding was an exceedingly plain one, and the only guests were John Clyde, Tom Bowker, Injun Jim, and Nick Wharton. And after the ceremony was over, the latter bent his honest face close to the ear of the blushing bride, and exclaimed, in a low tone:

"I knowed the Lord 'ud fetch everythin' round right with ye, Neddy, soon as I found how 'tarnal delikit ye war. He allus favors the weak. He allus showed the Wharton family considerable 'sideration. They was all on 'em delikit, so to speak. I tell ye, Neddy, ye've got a man inter a 'tarnal tangle this time, an' ole Nick don't pity him—in course he doesn't!"

[THE END.]

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